

The
CLOUDED PEARL
BERTA RUCK



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THE CLOUDED PEARL

NOVELS BY BERTA RUCK

HIS OFFICIAL FIANCÉE
THE WOOING OF ROSAMOND FAYRE
THE BOY WITH WINGS
IN ANOTHER GIRL'S SHOES
THE GIRLS AT HIS BILLET
MISS MILLION'S MAID
THE THREE OF HEARTS
THE YEARS FOR RACHEL
A LAND-GIRL'S LOVE STORY
THE DISTURBING CHARM
SWEETHEARTS UNMET
THE BRIDGE OF KISSES
SWEET STRANGER
THE ARRANT ROVER
THE WRONG MR. RIGHT
THE SUBCONSCIOUS COURTSHIP
SIR OR MADAM
THE DANCING STAR
THE LEAP YEAR GIRL
THE CLOUDED PEARL

THE CLOUDED PEARL

A Novel

BY
BERTA RUCK



NEW YORK
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1924

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To

E. NESBIT

WITH LOVE, AND THE THANKS OF YOUTH
(ANCIENT AND MODERN)

To-day those Modern Young, my sons, devour
Each word your wise gay wit has said or sung.
Accept this tribute to your fadeless power,
From one you moulded as the Ancient Young!

B. R.

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PART ONE—THE CAUSE

THE CLOUDED PEARL

CHAPTER I

HER BEGINNINGS

1

MARGARET VERITY, at nineteen, was what is called (as a term of reproach) "a modern girl."

To-day's girl is broadcasted to a world's opprobrium. Pilloried in the press, she is the theme of article after outraged article: "What Is Wrong with the Modern Girl?" "Why the Modern Girl Has Lost All Charm," and "Can the Modern Girl Love?" (Answer: in the negative.)

Something too much of this. Have her middle-aged accusers no memories of their own youth? Dare they quote it as perfect? Out of their own teens and twenties does no giggling spectre raise its head? None? Ah!

At times one fancies that even now girls are merely what they always were and always will be: namely, girls.

At other times one is brought upstanding by an example such as my friend Mrs. Verity's Margaret. She might have posed for the symbolic figure of deprecated modern girlhood.

Brusque, blasé, and neurotic! She was all that, and more. Not an idea in her head but of the hectic chase

after amusement from morn till night—or, rather, from afternoon until morning! An annexer of men, to whom she brought no gift of young love, but simply exasperation and disturbance! A peevish, pallid, rouging, cocktail-absorbing, chain-smoking, all-night-dancing, mother-snubbing modern of the most ungirlish type—that was Margaret Verity just before “the adventure.”

I am going to tell you all I know about that adventure and of what it meant to her, but I must go back first to Margaret’s beginnings.

2

There was nothing the matter with those. The girl’s roots were set in simple, wholesome soil. Her “inheritances,” as North country people call them, were sound enough.

Her mother, my friend Mrs. Verity, was a dear. Not clever; she never pretended to be that. Not a firm character; she certainly never pretended to be *that*! But she was as sweet as the simple flowers with which she filled the garden of her Sussex cottage. Pretty, too. The ingenuous face that artists used to call “the English rose type,” and used to paint looking wistful in a big picture hat tilted a trifle to one side, with an immense pink tulle motor veil tied round it and under the chin—that was Violet Verity when young. Clear eyes, upright figure, and good complexion. A good walker, a good tennis player (for nineteenth century standards), a good manager (of a tiny income), a good housewife and gardener. Deadly dull it sounds? Believe me, she was not

dull; she was saved from that by a gift which a great many more intelligent people of stronger character just simply have not got.

The genius for loving she had.

She asked no more from heaven than some one to whom to devote her life. Heaven sent Jack Verity.

Very attractive he must have been, though I've only seen his portraits. They are extraordinarily like his little daughter: Margaret inherited his short, determined profile, his carriage of the head buoyantly set on a proud neck, his eyes (large, wide apart and cloudy-grey, trimmed with a good deal of brown fringe). Men voted him a thoroughly good fellow; women not only loved, but liked him. He was a sailor—of all men the most idealized of women.

One hesitates to decide that this is because sailors are so much away from home. There remains this conviction, that a sailor is of all men the most pleasant, the easiest husband.

Mrs. Verity went so far as to say that a sailor was the only possible person to marry. Other men, Violet Verity said, were always *there*; taking you as a matter of course, seeing you at your worst, bringing out the most prosaic side of you. Other men make married life one monotonous long lane with no turning between the altar and the grave. Whereas with a sailor husband one knows, on the one hand, those months of love in absence, of memories, of anticipation while he is at sea. On the other hand, one has the contrast of those glorious weeks when he is at home, when one lives at concert pitch as a bride, when one puts one's best foot foremost as a house-

keeper, when one orders hot meat—even game!—for luncheon every day, when one puts on every morning a crisp clean blouse (she married in pre-jumper days), and when one can generally keep up the honeymoon atmosphere.

The Veritys kept up that atmosphere for years after their baby girl arrived. Even she added to it. Presently she was old enough to lisp an absurd ritual that her mother taught her.

“What are you, Margaret darling?” asked the mother. “Tell Daddy. (Listen, sweetheart.) What are you now?”

“A sailor’s daughter,” answered the mite, sturdy in her navy-blue morsel of a jersey, with an inch of navy serge skirt.

“Yes; and what *will* you be?”

“A sailor’s wife!”

“Yes! And what do you *hope* to be?”

“A sailor’s mummy.”

“Splendid!” laughed Jack Verity; and he caught the child up, tossed her till the brown hair danced on her head, while he shouted that music-hall ditty of his day:

“I want you to meet my girl!

Such a girl, such a girl; such a pearl!”

This was the atmosphere in which that baby began to grow up. Her young parents adored each other and her. Glorious times they all three had at the cottage, up to the very last moment of his leave.

Then he would kiss them a dozen times over “for the last time”; he’d pick up his bags, his heavy blue mackin-

tosh, and go back to sea; and Mrs. Verity would be left to eat up the cold meats and to finish wearing the once-put-on blouses, and to save up for the next leave of the sailor sweetheart.

He went down with his ship in the late autumn of 1914.

After which you can imagine that there was only one thing that kept her caring to live:

His little girl.

3

In that white-walled cottage in Sussex by the sea, there, on the bleak lap of the Downs, little Margaret Verity spent the next few years of a hardy life.

The child was brought up to go out every day in any weather. There were long tramps in the rain (and this was the girl who later never put her little French-heeled foot to the earth except when she stepped from the Rolls). A bedroom without a fireplace and with windows flung open winter and summer (this was hers who afterwards grumbled if the least thing went wrong with the steam heat). One makeshift serge frock, home-knitted jerseys, a couple of "prints," a mackintosh, thick boots, and a tam o' shanter—not much more in the whole of her wardrobe (she who afterwards never wore the same dance frock three times running, and who could not have counted the number of her other garments). She learnt to wash up, to lay the table, to do any odd jobs to lighten the work for their single servant (she who was presently the waiters' terror and the nightmare of the chambermaids!) Every morning of her life she splashed in her icy-cold

tub (yes, this same Margaret who at nineteen must wallow for hours up to her chin in heavily perfumed water so hot that she emerged at last parboiled, enervated, dizzy and slack). No luxuries did she know then; no parties, no chocolates, no silk underclothes, no fragile, expensive shoes; none, even, of the comforts to which a child of her age is at this era accustomed. All this, not because my friend Mrs. Verity was any Spartan by nature, but merely because the mother and the child were at that time what people call "miserably poor."

The widow had her pension, her cottage and garden, and that was all. She couldn't afford a daily governess. Margaret did lessons with her mother during the few hours that she spent indoors. They grew their own vegetables; they kept hens, sold eggs; they achieved two marvellous hedges of sweet peas from which they used to pull sheaves of blossoms which they packed up and sent away, to sell, also, at eighteen pence or half a crown a long box. This money was to be saved up to get a garden hose, at four shillings a foot, which Mrs. Verity could not yet afford, and a set of French cooking pans for her kitchen. About the menu there was always a good deal of hashed mutton, steamed vegetables, and rice pudding.

They seemed to do Margaret no harm.

When she was eleven and a half I went down, to find her the picture of health and bloom.

From the beach where her mother and I sat on a break-water to gossip, I watched the child going in for a dip in her club costume that fitted her like a coat of dark blue paint. Her shape was still childish, but of what beauty! Tall, without a trace of gawky coltishness, she

was strongly, harmoniously fashioned in every limb. I quoted: "That our sons may grow up as the young plants and our daughters be as the polished corners of the Temple!" Both prayers have been answered in your girl."

"She is so like Jack. She ought to be rather lovely when she grows up."

"What are you going to do with her then?"

"She says she will earn her own living and get rich and buy us both such pretty things. She longs for pretty things! But she makes her own pleasures here: she is perfectly happy with her shell collection and her wild-flower collection, and her books, and me. A profession? I suppose so. . . . It seems extraordinary," mourned this gentle late Victorian; "*we* never had to think of such things . . . Margaret! Darling! You've been in long enough. Come in, now. Please! At once!"

"Another five minutes," the child's clear treble rang back over the water. "Don't fuss, Mums."

Already you see whose was the ruling spirit of those two.

"The darling has more *character* than I ever had," the mother explained. "I wish she had more opportunities. Nobody in Jack's family can do a thing for her (they are all too poor). There is nothing to hope for from any of my family (all far too rich). There's only my uncle Tom, the dear old fellow who gave me away, and came all the way from South America to do it! *He* hasn't too much money. Every now and then, bless him, he manages to send us a cheque. At Christmas, sometimes, it has made all the difference." Unsuspecting

dear! Little did she foresee the difference which would be brought about to both of them by the arrival of her uncle's next cheque!

4

This came just before Margaret's twelfth birthday, with a note to say that it was to be spent just as the young woman chose in making that day a success, and with love from her affectionate old uncle.

It was for five pounds.

How often was Margaret Verity to toss away that sum on a bet, a pair of dancing shoes, a casket of some exotic scent!

What a fortune five pounds seemed to her at the time of Uncle Tom's cheque!

The cottage could not hold her.

Hatless, she skipped out into the frosty garden (it was near Christmas). Up and down the path to the little white gate three times she skipped before she could even tell her mother what had been in that envelope.

"Five pounds. Five *pounds!*"

In imagination the child spent it many times over in less than five minutes.

"First of all, Mums must have a smart new hat. You must! I hate that old black velvet beast you've worn for centuries! And one of those ducky bead hand bags I saw in a 'vertisement instead of your leather one that's gone all shiny and horrid where you hold it! And you've *never* had furs like other people's mumsies in the pictures in the *Tatler*. Do you think a grey-squirrel muff and col-

lar right up to your nose, or what is a sable stole? You ought to have one. I *adore* rich furs; I've never seen *any*. We can get you *some* out of all this money, so—"

"Margaret! The money isn't to be spent on your mums at all! It's to be spent on what you'd enjoy."

"But that's getting things for you!" retorted the little eager creature. I can imagine her, flinging arms about her mother's neck and opening those great eyes (grey-blue as an English summer sky, fringed with brown backward-curling lashes that softened the brightness of her glance), starry with excitement. "Don't be silly, Mums. Can't I do what I like with my own five—"

"My pet, you must think of your Uncle Tom. As he said what he wished done with his cheque, you will have to spend it as he wished."

"Tiresome old thing! Oh, no! I don't mean that. Frightfully kind *old* thing! I'll do as he wants."

"He wants to give you what you would call a good time for your birthday. You are to choose."

Neither of them dreamt what was to hang upon that choice of Margaret's! Supposing she *had* elected to give a Christmas party for the few children of that neighbourhood, with a tiny Christmas tree, cakes made at home, and a lucky dip, with toys from the sixpenny bazaar! Even the conjuror from Brighton. . . .

She thought of this.

If she had followed those thoughts how many lives would have been different!

But with a swift shake of her head Margaret decided: "No. I don't choose a party. That means staying here. I choose to go up to London. *With* my own mums of

course. I haven't been to London since that one time. When I was *quite* a little girl, when darling Daddy took us to the Zoo. You remember?"

"Yes, dearest; I remember."

"We'll go again," planned the twelve-year-old, still unsophisticated. "Do you remember how Daddy laughed because I was frightened of a ride on the camel? I said he was too tall and I would only go in the little llama cart. Daddy said a sailor's daughter must be brave, and so I went on the camel, only the camel rolled so that I was nearly seasick! Of course, I was only a very *little* girl then. You remember, don't you, Mums?"

"Yes."

It was a knife into Violet's heart every time the child revived memories of Jack. Yet not for worlds would she have checked them.

"So we'll go to the Zoo in the morning and in the afternoon—oh, *would* it be too much? There would *be* enough money," urged Margaret, "and I've never been, though lots of people of twelve have, and some people of eleven—"

"Been where?"

"To the theatre! to a *matinée*! Do, *do* let us go to 'Peter Pan.' Let's go up by the early train on Monday."

5

This meant a drive of four miles to the Junction.

A piercing morning it was; skies pearl-clear over frost-powdered Downs; road like iron, corrugated into frozen ruts under the farmer's cart wheels.

The farmer's cart was up in good time; Margaret wasn't.

In spite of Spartan upbringing she was no born early riser. Also, she hadn't been able to find her best gloves, her stockings newly darned for the occasion. At the last moment she'd mislaid the pattern of wool for knitting a sailor's muffler which she meant to match in town.

The fact is the girl had been born (like many of us) a mislayer of things, a leaver, a dropper, a forgetter. In those early days she struggled against it. . . .

Anyhow, they were behind time. At the Junction poor Mrs. Verity (who suffered agonies of flurry the moment she left her tiny well-managed home) found herself with only just time to get the two third-class tickets, to snatch up the change, to tear over the bridge, to rattle down the staircase and on to No. 4 platform for the express up to London. The guard's whistle was at his lips, the green flag in his hand. . . . It was the nearest thing in the world! Think if the Veritys hadn't caught that train! Think if that friendly porter hadn't explained: "In you get, m'm! Anywhere! Get in *here!*" Think if he hadn't bundled them into that first-class smoking carriage just as the train was moving out! That carriage was occupied, apparently, by one man, a quantity of expensive-looking hand baggage, and a large bundle of fur rugs.

The guard banged the door to behind the Veritys.

The train gathered speed, the white plume of steam, floating out past the window. Poor Mrs. Verity, flushed, heated, and breathless, picked herself up from that rock-like object against which she had been flung, namely, the

shoulder of her fellow-passenger, a grim-looking man who should have been wearing khaki. (This was in 1916 when one did not expect to see anybody over eighteen or under thirty-five wearing anything else.)

This man was in plain clothes particularly smartly cut, but not cut for him. Everything about him was that of the "gentleman's gentleman"; bowler, overcoat, linen, knitted tie, dark trousers, boots—no, I beg his pardon; *boot*. His left boot had a thick sole, he had been invalided out for a wound in the hip bone.

With fury in his face he drew himself out of Mrs. Verity's embrace and told her, in the severest tones that had ever been addressed to her, that this carriage was reserved, madam.

Mrs. Verity, putting her shabby toque straight, replied that she knew that; that she was dreadfully sorry; that she had been thrown into the carriage by the guard, and that she and her little girl would get out at the next stop.

"There won't be one. This train," sternly announced the martinet in the bowler (who had, as Mrs. Verity could now see, "late Sergeant-Major, Regulars" written all over him), "this train, madam, doesn't stop until Victoria."

"Oh, dear; doesn't it?" faltered Mrs. Verity, crushed—as she always was, by strangers. "I can only say I am dreadfully sorry—"

"Wallace," broke in a voice from the other end of the compartment. This voice, rather feeble and husky, came out of what Mrs. Verity in her flurry had taken for a stack of railway rugs and spare garments belonging to the irate ex-sergeant-major "Wallace!"

The late sergeant-major replied in the voice of a chidden child: "Sir?"

"Hold your tongue, Wallace," commanded the bundle of rugs, striving to talk loudly, "and beg the lady's pardon at once."

Here little Margaret Verity burst out laughing where she sat.

Margaret's laugh was one of the prettiest sounds that I have ever heard. Utterly spontaneous, and so gleeful, so zestful! It seemed as if it would go on and on. Then, on a staccato note, it stopped. It stopped as though (suddenly as she had been amused) the child had become conscious that it wasn't manners to show her amusement thus unrestrainedly. And now she blushed. Although country-bred, she had never been one of those apple-cheeked children who turn plum-faced in later life. Margaret's young face was not exactly pale—that sounds unhealthy—it was smoothly, evenly uncoloured. It was like cream into which there has been stirred a few drops of fruit juice. When she blushed that creamy rose bloomed into an abrupt clear carmine. Most arresting, most beautiful.

One does not know whether it was the sight of that exquisite child's blush or the sound of her gleeful laugh which first caught the attention of Wallace's master.

He sat up; he put down the heavy fur collar, pushed up the peaked cloth cap he wore. He turned a sharp-featured fair face, the face of a quite young man, upon the child before him; and he demanded in that curious, half-simpering, half-throaty voice:

"What were you laughing at?"

"I am sorry, I oughtn't to have," said little Margaret, the blush not yet faded. "I was laughing at you."

"At me?"

"I couldn't help it. It was so funny. I mean the way you said 'Hold your tongue' and then 'Beg the lady's pardon.' How *could* he if he held his *tongue*?"

"Margaret, dear!" from Margaret's mother. . . .

The young man turned towards Mrs. Verity and lifted his cap.

"So true," he commented, "I apologize to everybody. Do you mind if I talk to you as we go up? I am bored with Wallace and myself. May I say I'm glad to have somebody else as carriage companions?"

Mrs. Verity saw at once that he would be allowed to say what he liked. He was the type of young man who can say anything without offence. He was a sahib and a soldier, or had been a soldier. Poor boy, poor boy (he was under twenty-six)! Every bone of his face showed through parchment skin. A flush burnt on those haggard cheeks, his blue eyes shone like jewels, the brighter because they had been put in 'with smutty fingers.' Black, curly lashes accentuated those feverishly bright eyes. The look of them, the voice, the wrappings, the concerned devoted soldier servant—these things Mrs. Verity was not too flustered to interpret. Here was a very sick man indeed. Sick, not with wounds, but from the deadliest blow that war has yet learnt to smite.

Gas!

"Oh, please—" faltered Mrs. Verity who, as she confessed, never did know what to say to "any other" young men.

Her sympathetic face spoke for her. He smiled at her, and added, to Margaret: "I loathe journeys; do you?"

"I simply adore them," breathed the child, rising to this. "I haven't been for any, hardly."

"I have been for too many," said the invalid. He tossed aside a corner of the fur rug. "I have spent half my life trapesing about—"

"Mr. Charles," put in his servant, rising, "will you keep yourself properly wrapped up, now?"

"Wallace, you go to—you shut up. Don't bully me. I can't curse you above a whisper if you do. Don't take advantage." Wallace, having tucked the fur rug in, sank back to his place. The young gassed officer went on: "Well, I haven't got many more journeys. It's London, then Switzerland, this next trip."

"Delightful," murmured Mrs. Verity. Margaret exclaimed: "Switzerland? Wouldn't it be lovely if we could go to Switzerland! You *are* lucky! Tobogganning and bob-sleighbing and skiing and skating and all those *divine* things in those books about the 'Winter Sports'—"

"But they're packing me off to a sanatorium."

"Oh, I see. You're going there to get well."

The young gassed officer shrugged his shoulders. He added: "And where's your journey to?"

"London," exulted the child, lighting up, bouncing in her corner seat. "London for the whole day!" Excitement took her. Joyously she babbled of the Zoo, the lunch "out," the theatre. "Have *you* been to see 'Peter Pan'? Have you been to lots of matinées, then? Do you know that this is the first time I have been inside a theatre since I was born? Isn't it glorious? I've been given

a very great deal of money for a birthday present, to do what I liked on my twelfth birthday. This is what we are going to do with my five pounds.”

In racing-high spirits, she rattled on so that Mrs. Verity would not have been able to check her had she tried—

She didn't try. She realized. Innocent, unconscious chatter from this gay little creature at the beginnings of life came as a godsend to this sad, self-centered young man setting forth on his last, his hopeless journey. Poignant indeed was the contrast of that railway-carriage group.

With all his ears he was listening, as though he drank in good cheer from her racing words. His eyes were fastened upon that vivid face opposite to him.

As he looked at the child, so the eyes of Wallace never left him.

Some time before they got to town (probably at East Croydon), the young man turned from the child to her mother.

“Frightfully rude of me,” he apologized in that pathetic whisper, “not to have introduced myself. You will forgive the vagaries of an invalid? My name is Mount—Charles Mount. If you don't mind very much I'll give you my card. Good Lord, I am buried before my time in this mass of fur junk. Wallace, have I got a card on me? Produce it, will you?” Wallace produced it. “Look here, I am going to write down the address of that beastly Swiss place. Pencil, Wallace. Do you think I might ask you for something?”

“Please do; if there is anything—”

“Look here, I haven't got anybody belonging to me.

Except Archie, my young brother. He's in a destroyer somewhere. Not a healthy job. I've no one to write to me except him. Just the two of us, and *he* might leave me behind, you never know! Letters mean a lot to a—to me— Do you think you could allow me to have a line to say how the little girl enjoys her *matinée* and that sort of thing? It would be kind. Not if it's too much trouble, but . . . it would be very kind."

What could tender-hearted Violet Verity say? She was emotioned by the whole incident. Tears softened her always soft eyes. I can imagine how her face, sweetly gentle under her hopeless toque, quivered at this; I can imagine the timid voice that promised, "Of course I'll write, if you like letters. And will you write, Mr. Mount? and say how you—how you get to Switzerland? Here's our address. Margaret shall write to you herself about the *matinée*."

"Will you, Margaret?" said the young man.

"Oh, rather! I love writing letters. I've hardly any to write! I'll write to you," promised the child, "until you come home again."

At Victoria, of course, there was a good deal of bustle, of handing that bundle of rugs across to another platform and of finding those stacks of Mr. Mount's extravagant luggage.

Mrs. Verity (eager to help, but, poor dear! perfectly ignorant about what to do once she left her own well-known *milieu*) waited by him while the grim-faced, stricken Wallace put the fear of God into every porter on the platform. Margaret danced in a narrow circle, like

a terrier on a leash, watching the Christmas crowds, the vanloads of holly and mistletoe, the queues of soldier men loaded up for leave.

Mr. Mount murmured: "You're going to have a wonderful day with the child."

"Yes, I think so. I am sure she'll enjoy it. (Why can't I think of something comforting to say to this poor fellow?) She enjoys everything."

"Hope she always will. Her life ought to be roses all the way. Ghastly, the inevitable way one drops into threadbare quotation, isn't it?" he added, as if he and Mrs. Verity were at some dinner party where they had to make talk. "Do you happen to know those other lines—

" '—on Lethe's shore

Old Charon, leaning on his oar, waits for my pence?' "

"No. I—I am afraid I haven't read that poem at all—"

Here Wallace came hurtling back through the press. "Now, Mr. Charles—"

He lifted his cap. "Not good-bye. I'll say what the gladiators used to say to Cæsar; do you remember?"

Unfortunately, poor Mrs. Verity (out of her long-ago history classes) did remember.

"Hail, Cæsar! We, who are about to die, salute you!"

She choked over her good-bye. But he had Margaret's most joyous smile to take on his journey.

Six weeks after that they had their last news of Charles Mount.

He had died at that sanatorium place in Switzerland, and he had left his very considerable fortune to Miss

Margaret Verity "in gratitude for a friendship which had greatly cheered the last part of his life."

One of those gigantic swollen fortunes of the war, made out of tinned foods or shoe leather or gramophone records—something that the soldiers had to have in masses!—had been made by the firm of Mount & Sons. The father had not lived to see it, the profits were divided between the two sons, and now the elder, Charles, left his to Miss Verity, free of legacies! Everything was to come to the child at once, without any tiresome trusteeships or tyings-up until she should be twenty-one. Young Archie Mount in the destroyer had his own money. He got the family portraits, his mother's jewelry and personal belongings. Everything else was to belong to this little stranger whom Charles had seen once, and from whom he had received perhaps half a dozen letters.

Imagine it. . . . Reams came to me from her mother to tell me of this wonderful good fortune. Wasn't it splendid that Margaret would not have to grow up trammelled and suppressed by the want of the money! After all, the darling was to have every opportunity—education! foreign travel! charming surroundings! She would get to know crowds of the nicest people! would make a circle of delightful friends!

In fact, life was to be roses all the way for this child of twelve.

6

Nine years later I saw her again.

I must say it was a shock.

CHAPTER II

TEA IN THE PADDED ROOM

1

IN November I went to call on Mrs. Verity at her London house.

This was in Hill Street. One of the tall, exclusive, discreet-looking small houses of which the front door is as ceremonious as the moulded lid of some quattrocento casket. What a change from the Veritys' last front door; the ever-open, honeysuckle-garlanded porch of the cottage looking forth across the windy Downs to the sea! Mrs. Verity's note told me Margaret had bought this Hill Street house just as it stood, as the furniture appealed to her, and that she would presently "add touches" of her own.

A butler with the face of a dyspeptic Sphinx showed me up the mysteriously dim, heavily carpeted staircase into the drawing-room. . . . Heavens, what a surprise!

How unlike the Veritys!

How unlike their cottage living-room's homely white distemper, its bright rose chintz, its lattice windows flung open wide to the sea breeze and the breath of sweet peas and pinks from the garden.

I gazed about this new place. Walls, sombrely and richly gilded, were almost hidden by draperies of marvel-

lous embroideries, by cabinets of costliest Chinese lacquer, black and gold, and by the dim-red panels of a great screen sprawled over by dragons. Tall lamps stood in corners under weirdly coloured pagoda shades; upon carven stands or joss tables squatted other lamps, in the shape of monkeys, of couchant monster frogs. On the black carpet that you sank into up to you knees there were crowded bed-like divans, divan-like chairs, pouffes, tasselled floor cushions—all covered in brocade: gold, black, and a touch of dragon's-blood scarlet. Heavily drooping curtains of that gold-and-black brocade framed the windows, which had inner curtains and half-blinds of golden net. Tables of inlay showed a scatter of fashion papers (*Eve, Vogue, The Tatler, La Vie Parisienne*), magazines, new novels; also a huge box of chocolates, upsetting its contents and drifts of white packing shavings over the hearthrug, also a flung-down new doll, one of these new grotesques as big as a child of three, dressed as a young man in evening clothes with a wig of pale-gold silk. The whole room, I thought, represented some interior decorator's dream of a voluptuous lap of luxury.

Tastes differ. To me it gave a stifling, padded-room feeling. I called it dark.

It was full of flowers! Man-high vases of trumpet lilies; a brazen stand full of tubs of forced lilac; many bowls of Roman hyacinth, growing in fibre. Somewhere there smouldered one of the joss sticks which one finds alight in a clairvoyant's lair. On a heavily carved pedestal, one of those perfume-burning lamps was in full blast. And, over all these mingling scents, there brooded the atmosphere of a shut-up room in which people heavily,

thoroughly, and incessantly smoked . . . an Oriental, languorous warmth was meant, I fancy. . . .

Tastes differ. *I* called it stuffy.

Altogether the very last atmosphere which I had expected to find surrounding that open-air Englishwoman, Mrs. Verity!

She came in.

2

“And what about your girl?” I asked presently. “I long to see Margaret again; is she well?”

“Oh, yes! She’s *quite* well . . . really—”

Instantly there flashed upon me the suspicion that all was not well with the child. The word “really” tacked on, in that tone, to any sentence, is enough to contradict it. Also there was something in Mrs. Verity’s expression. The first glance found her unchanged; even though she was wearing (for the first time since I’d known her) a “good” frock and shoes that matched it. Her figure was erect, her gentle face wholesomely pink as ever, her eyes as clear. But there was something in her expression. That touch of wistfulness there had always been. Now there was a touch of uneasiness as well. Was she talking to hide it?

“Of course, you know, Margaret has *grown*, very fast. It takes girls some years to get over that. . . . ‘As lovely as she promised to be?’ Ah, she is very pretty. You’ll see. I don’t think this just because I am her mother,” Mrs. Verity told me with eager, defensive pride. “So many people admire her enormously. Everywhere we’ve

been. Everybody asks who she is and invites her and makes much of her. The darling is so much sought after! So many admirers!"

"Not engaged yet?"

Here the telephone bell let off its trill, deadened by the padding and upholstering of the perfumed tea-cosy of a room.

"Forgive me." Mrs. Verity turned to the pompadour-dressed doll that camouflaged the telephone. "Yes? . . . Oh, how do you do, Eric? No! I'm sorry, Margaret's *not* in . . . gone to the races with Claude Oddley and the others. . . . Oh, did she? . . . I'm afraid she must have forgotten she promised. How naughty of her! *This* evening she is going with a party to the 'Nine o'clock Revue.' . . . Back in about half an hour, I hope. . . . Well, come in to tea and tell her. Will you? . . . Do . . . Good-bye."

She turned back to answer my question.

"Oh, no; Margaret isn't engaged. Just these crowds of admirers. . . . A positive guard of honour always. Far more young men than girls would ever have *wanted*, when we were girls—"

"You mean far more young men at a *time*?"

"Ah, well! Personally I never wanted more than the one man *ever*. I was always 'a hopelessly obsolete romantic' as the darling calls me. But Margaret must have her bodyguard. They take her out to dances and theatres and race meetings and Lord's and the boat race and Hurlingham and everything that's going. . . . I hear it's the modern way for young men to *afficher* themselves with the prettiest girls, but that they aren't

proposing any more? We don't notice that. They constantly propose to Margaret," smiled the mother, so touchingly that I hadn't the heart even to think how unlikely it was that the heiress to the Mount money should lack proposals. "One of them, especially, is absolutely the darling's *slave*. This, between ourselves . . . but you'd see, anyhow. It's he who has taken her to the steepleschasing to-day. Devoted to her! Do you know him? You probably know of him? He's just come into the title. It's young Lord Oddley."

Her gentle voice took on the very slightest note of importance. She was the least snobbish creature in this world, but in a woman of her upbringing a title (and a very old and honourable title at that) cannot fail to arouse a certain thrill.

"Is Margaret fond of him?"

"So difficult to say, isn't it, with girls?"

Secretly I thought it had been easy enough to "say" with some girls. Printed on Violet's face at her first meeting with Jack Verity must have been the dumb confession that she was his, and his alone. There had been the true romance. I wondered if it were to come for Jack Verity's daughter and this young Lord Oddley? Mild excitement pervaded me at the thought of seeing for myself. I am, I admit, a mass of enthusiastic curiosity. I prepared to meet romance, even in this rather overfurnished setting.

"Do tell me about this. How long has your girl known the young man? Where did you meet him?"

"In Switzerland, at the 'Winter Sports' about two years ago. He and his sister Cynthia were at our hotel.

Cynthia is Margaret's *very* great friend, just now. Cynthia found this house for her. Insisted upon Margaret's buying it—"

(Ah! Did "Cynthia" account for the un-Verity-like furniture?)

"—Cynthia's taste is marvellous, Margaret says. She seems to *amuse* Margaret always—she—"

Here, again, the telephone bell.

"So sorry; may I? Do you know, this goes on from morning until night for Margaret!" She took up the receiver. "Yes? No; this is *Mrs. Verity* speaking . . . No. She is not back yet . . . I expect them back at any moment. Can I give any message? . . . Oh, you will come round? Yes; do" (less enthusiastically, I thought). "Come in to tea. Good-bye. . . . That was Cynthia speaking. . . . I suppose I'd better let Benson know that there will be crowds of people here for tea in a minute. . . ." She rang.

When the dyspeptic Sphinx (of whom *Mrs. Verity* was obviously in grave terror) had taken her tremulous order and had disappeared, I asked: "Would you like it?"

"What?"

"For Margaret to accept this young man."

"Oh," hesitated *Mrs. Verity*.

I was expecting her to utter the *cliché* peculiar to that type of gentle sentimentalist (such as, "Of course, if the dear child loves him I should not dream of being selfish and of standing in the way of her getting married as soon as she likes"), when *Mrs. Verity* remarked with a tinge of bitterness: "It won't make *much* difference whether I like it or—"

Here came another interruption; sounds of a sudden, violent commotion assaulted that restrained house.

Outside it, there were motor noises; then a slam of the front door, barking, laughter, shrill cries, several people seemed to be falling upstairs at once. The door opened. There entered helter-skelter—how *many* people the bewildered eye could not at first take in: a mob of tall, glossily brushed youths following a very tall girl in a leather motoring coat and a small, scarlet suède hat. The mob seemed to be jostling one another in joyous horse-play as they came, to trip over each other's heels and over the madly excited dogs that leapt in arabesques about their legs, and to babble all at once in a manner that reminded one of several gramophone records put on simultaneously and much too fast. One seemed to hear:

“—poisonous luck wah'n't it poisonous. *Luck* my dear man how can you say hullo here's Eric hullo Eric! Hullo Odds! *poisonous* luck, when you backed—laughed so much back hundred to eight in the finals won't have any tea but I'd love a drink! Well? Well? 'Exasperation' first AND after all that bubbly at lunch Paddock enclosure 'exasperation' first 'Tiara' second 'This Freedom' eighth or something perfect floats of people in that Armstrong Siddeley 'Tiara' second? What? Going to put a fiver on her and DOWN Mixy! DOWN changed my Three doubles at Hullo Eric had an EARTHLY 'Exasperation' first poisonous luck oh, NO! she DIDN'T had you anything on Ah! how do you do Mrs. Verity did it well under an hour and forty just my luck I—”

The noise they made almost swamped the voice of Mrs. Verity saying, “Here she is. This is Margaret.”

3

I found myself shaking hands with the tall girl, looking up into her face.

It was an arrestingly pretty little face; oval, big-eyed, with a mouth of petulant and flowerlike curves. Only—too pale, too fine-drawn. Too thickly powdered, and those great eyes, grey-blue as English summer skies, seemed to have lost softness. Was it because their fringe of brown had been caked with heaviest eyelash black?

“Hah do you do?” she greeted me languidly. “Of course I remember you. At the cottage. *Cent-uries* ago. . . .” She put up her hands to her furs, to her manifold layers of leather, cloth, tricot. One by one she peeled them off, while the bodyguard hovered making abortive efforts to help: “Can’t *I* do that?” “Let me, Margaret.” “Here, let me help you off with it—”

She didn’t look at any of them. She remarked carelessly, “Here, Odds. Catch!” and threw the bundle literally in the face of a wispy youth of about twenty-one, with swept-back gilt hair and a mimosa-yellow waistcoat. He staggered under the impact of the bundle of wraps, caught them, laid them down on one of the pouffes, and continued to hover at Margaret’s elbow. When she dropped into the divan-like chair nearest to the fire, exclaiming, “It’s bitterly cold; wish we could keep this room cosier!” this youth subsided onto the floor cushion at her feet, his eyes glued to her face, his mouth slightly open as if to catch each word she let fall.

This, I guessed, was her slave, Claude Oddley.

I just saw that he was rather like that gilt-wigged

dressmaker's doll (that some one had now picked up off the table and had flung on the top of the piano where he sprawled his limp length). For the moment I couldn't spare young Oddley another glance.

I must look at Margaret as she lounged full length, exquisite head buried back in the cushions, endless, flesh-silk-stockinged, stick-like legs crossed and stretched out far beyond the skirt of her brown silk knitted frock. It hung on her as the flag hangs on the staff when there isn't a breeze. What, what had happened to that harmoniously sturdy young body which had reminded me of the polished corners of the Temple? What of those limbs which were rounded and smooth as the base of an elephant's tusk? Dwindled and shrunk to this? Curious words to have to use of a girl only at the end of her teens! But why was she *withering*? Yes, that was the effect of her. A bud, withering just when it should be swelling into proudest bloom. Tastes differ. I suppose she "looked right" to that admiring bodyguard of hers?

These filled that padded room to oppression with themselves, their dogs (two rough-haired terriers and a bulldog), their thick, circling gales of tobacco smoke, their field glasses, their litter of sporting papers, their gramophone-record-like babel of racing odds, motor shop, Christian- and nick-names.

In a few moments, too, the place was further littered by larger quantities of cigarette debris than I have before seen. Ash lay in drifts on the carpet; ash between brocade cushions; ash in saucers; ash and smoking "ends" mingling with dregs of tea at bottoms of cups; ash on the Queen Anne silver tea tray; ash among the sugar; burnt-

out matches in the fibre for the hyacinths; ash dropped into Margaret's brown silken lap; ash powdered the coats of the dozing dogs; ash on the fender stool; ash—yes, if you'll believe me, I observed *some* ash even in the ash trays.

To return to the bodyguard. These fell over each other to attend to Margaret with matches and with cigarettes—"Here, try one o' mine—" "No! Margaret won't touch anything but those heavily doped brutes she and Cynthia buy from that ghastly little Greek in—" They plied her with tea and cakes, the late *Star*, her racing card and beaded bag that she'd left in the car.

Which of these obviously enslaved youths was the favourite?

Interesting to speculate. Was she going to encourage the last of the Oddleys? She took no more notice of him than she did of the giant doll he was so like; seemed, indeed, to have more to say to "Eric," the red-haired undergraduate with the "taking" smile, pretty voice, and beautiful socks. I wondered if Eric spelt romance?

"You promised me," Eric was reproaching her. "Ten days ago you promised me you'd dance to-night. At the Embassy—"

"Well, I must have forgotten to put it down. All I remember is telling Odds I'd join his party for the Little Theatre. Better fight it out between you."

Oh, she was queening it. But she held herself, I thought, rather unqueenly. Or was that just the fashionable débutante slouch that showed her so roundbacked, so coffin-chested, with collarbones upon which one could hang a hat?

She had hung upon them a very beautiful pearl string with a diamond clasp. Her other jewellery was the arrow of diamonds in her hat, a wrist-watch on a narrow black ribbon crusted with gems, and a long platinum chain, on which was slung a jingling collection of what her father would have called "gadgets." There was a god of green jade, a gold-framed pocket mirror, a tiny gold vanity case, a case for cigarettes, a pencil, a lipstick in a jade-and-nacré tube.

Mechanically she took up the mirror, made a little moue, turned to the lipstick and began to outline in vivid carmine the pale, petal curve of her upper lip. "What's good for spots?" she asked fractiously. "I have another *beastly* spot coming just there; can't *think* why, can you, Violet?" (to her mother).

"No, I can't, darling. . . . I never got them when I was your age, I don't now."

"No, you never have any worries. You aren't like me, Vi. You hadn't grown so fast," Margaret explained, looking critically upon her mother. "You hadn't anything to *do* in *your* time. . . . You didn't wake up every morning feeling so *absolutely* mouldy."

"Mouldy?" took up Mrs. Verity in quick concern; "what do you mean by 'mouldy,' darling?"

Chorus of young things who had come in the car:

"Ha! don't you know what mouldy is, Mrs. Verity? I get that mouldy feeling every morning of my life; don't you, Odds?"

"I take any bet that I feel mouldier than any of you. I wake up feeling like death," enlarged young Oddley. "Feeling like death. When my blighter comes in with my

early tea, it's all I can do not to hurl it at his head. Fact." "Tea's all right. It's the mere mention of anything to *eat*," groaned the youth with the bulldog.

"I don't begin to live," added the boy who was drinking brandy and soda instead of tea, "until one o'clock."

"You're alive by one o'clock?" exclaimed a pallid Adonis with a Guard's tie. "Half-past one is my very earliest. At two, I *do* begin to sit up and take some faint notice. By four I feel *rather* better, thanks. By six, one *starts* to spend the day. How any one can exist *pre-lunch* I don't know. Every day, in every respect I, personally, get mouldier and mouldier."

One knew it was a pose, but scarcely a pretty one.

Worse; if you take the hideous word "mouldy" as meaning "not quite fresh," it was not entirely inappropriate!

This whole group of young people. . . . Difficult to see them just now; when the tea had come in the heavy curtains had been drawn, the lights switched on behind the shades of dim, petunia-purple and deep rose colour. It was darkness made rosily visible, but I had taken stock of the bodyguard in the daylight.

Now, please realize! this post-war bodyguard was of fundamentally decent boys (even Lord Oddley, though a fool, was "nice"). Nice-looking, too, all of them.

Each generation of women thinks that the partners of their youth represent the golden age of manly beauty. "Look," urge matrons, "at these photographs of Dick, Tom and Harry when they were young men of the age of Margaret's bodyguard. Doesn't it show you—"

Groups, taken at Sandhurst, Woolwich, or on a ship;

football groups; tennis-playing groups of heavily moustached young men of the eighteen eighties or nineties. Crews of boats, at Henley's long pre-war! One looks . . . and one shakes one's head. So heavy; so stolid; so hairy. And ah, how lumpily clad were the men who, now in their thirties and forties, were then in their teens or twenties!

In many respects the lads of to-day are vastly better-looking than those of the yesterday to which Jack Verity belonged.

Partly, of course, it is the infinitely more becoming cut of their clothes. But the body is more than raiment. Their build, poise and movement are better. They are more graceful, more supple, more pliant. Their physical exercises have been on better lines than those of Sandow's pupils in King Edward's reign. Ponderous "apparatus" has been done away with. You don't see now those over-muscular or muscle-bound bulky shapes (as regretted by fathers and uncles: "Never meet a decent-looking, well set-up young fellow nowadays. *Women!* That's what they are getting like."). More sophisticatedly groomed are they than the nineteenth century blood. Quicker in the glance, quicker (I think!) at the uptake. Their hands, hair and teeth receive more passionately single-aimed attention.

But—in other respects, hasn't their health been allowed to go?

Curiously pasty-faced were these young men in attendance on Violet's girl. Towny-fied, indoorish-looking in spite of the fact that they had just motored up from the country (adopting, as drivers, the motto, "Safety

last"). Sallow, all of them. Their eyes—most of them—had that dull, strained, puffy-around-the-lids look which comes from too few hours' sleep in the twenty-four.

This is an underslept generation. Which of them thinks of any sleep till dawn? Underslept, underwalked. Which of them goes for an afternoon's tramp in the rain? ("Walk? WALK? But my new 'Indian X' gets me there in six and a half minutes . . . bzzzzupp!") Underwalked, but overdanced. Overmotored. Overtennised. Over-Ruggered. Over-Ritized! (At least this section of it was.) Certainly oversmoked. (Incessantly they lighted one cigarette from another.) Overstimulated. Cramming into twenty-four hours the activities that would have sufficed for one month in the life of the young Jack Verity; and making plans for further activities weeks ahead. . . .

Some of this bodyguard doubtless had professions. Some were in business. Or they had regimental duties, or had to read for exams which meant the beginning of their career. Oh, they had real work to do. I know this type of modern. They work hard. But—perish the thought that they should play less than those who have no other occupation in the world than to amuse themselves! Those who must work live at double pressure, that's all.

I thought: "Well, if they enjoy it!" The boys (splendid material abused, but of stronger fibre than the girl) did apparently enjoy their lives. But Margaret? The girl? What was she getting out of this scurry and rush?

Cigarette holder in one hand, Martini in the other,

there she lounged. . . . I watched the lovely, fatigued, blank little face.

I saw why her mother was growing that anxious look. The Sphinx announced: "Miss Oddley."

4

So here was another factor in Margaret's life: Margaret's best girl friend.

As she appeared round the screen my eye was caught first by her boots. They were of white suède, rucked high up the leg. Then came a rough white frieze skirt. Then an insolently cut coat of sap-green leather with a high collar. Above this appeared a sharp-featured profile not unlike her brother's, a many-jointed sap-green cigarette holder, and a sap-green leather cap. Between the cigarette holder and the cap appeared the glint of a monocle also lightly tinted green.

The wearer of these peculiarities dashed up to Margaret Verity, and for one moment, removing the cigarette holder (which was almost long enough to have been left in the umbrella stand), kissed the girl fondly on both cheeks before taking any notice of Mrs. Verity, and exclaimed: "Peggy, why didn't you ring up? I have been panting to know for certain about this show on the twenty-second."

"Oh, that's all right, Cynthia," broke in Claude Oddley from his seat on the floor cushion; "that's arranged. I'm to pick up Margaret, she's dining with me, and I'm bringing her along to the excitement afterwards."

"Oh, lovely! Claude displaying a little intelligence for

once. This is because His Nibs is now of age, I suppose? You know it was his birthday on Wednesday. I made him celebrate it in bills. Paying them, I mean. *Wasn't* it a brilliant brainwave?" rattled on Miss Oddley, pushing her brother off that floor cushion onto the already heavily littered carpet, and taking his seat. Even while she talked nonsense her eyes were the most alertly calculating that I have seen in any young woman's head; her brother might be the heir, but it was obviously she who ruled him. "There we sat in the book room at the Half Moon Street place, up to the ceiling in correspondence! Bills all around us, cheque books, trustees and a stray cousin or so, and I invented quite a good game for Claude to play with the other people. He'd hold up a bill in its envelope and say, 'Guess how much this is for?—from my bootmaker (or my shirt man or my hairdresser or whomever it was)—and it's spread from my last term at Eton (or whenever it was) until now. Guess how much it is for, and you can have the amount if you guess shillings and all right. Besides my paying it.'"

"*Did* anybody guess, Cynthia?" demanded Margaret. The first trace of a smile had appeared upon her face. Yes, she was evidently amused. The swift rattle of this older, livelier girl seemed to have a vitalizing effect upon her. She looked a languid princess listening to the fooling of her paid jester.

"Yes, I did. I guessed a bill from Lobb's to the very shilling. And why? Because I had opened it by mistake the last time it came saying they were reluctantly compelled. . . . So I got the whole one hundred thirty-seven pounds, fourteen shillings and eightpence. Not too bad.

Pity I went and put it all on 'This Freedom' who came in seventh. Do you know, I very nearly put it on 'Tiara,' wasn't it maddening? However, there were my bills at Woolland's, and Deb's and Reville's and my beauty place; Claude stumped up for all those. Happy little family birthday party that. But of course the real celebrations are on the twenty-second. It will be lovely, Peggy. Are you going to wear your new Egyptian?"

Here Mrs. Verity (who, by the way, had not yet been greeted by Miss Oddley, of whom she was obviously in awe) interposed from behind the teapot: "Cynthia dear, I don't want to interfere. . . . Margaret darling, when you said the twenty-second, you don't mean Wednesday week?"

"Yes, it is next Wednesday week. Why? Oh, Violet, don't be tiresome and say there is anything else on?"

"My pet, there certainly is. Have you forgotten? I'm afraid it is very important. Your Uncle Tom is expected to land from South America on the twenty-first. After more than ten years. And you know, dear, his first night in London he must dine with us. I am afraid we couldn't possibly—"

"Oh, what a cruel blow! This simply cannot be borne," exclaimed the monocled girl. "It's not only the dance but—" She exchanged with her brother a look that seemed to speak of countless plans. "It's all been arranged for, Mrs. Verity! If Peggy does not turn up it all crashes and crumbles! Oh, it's not to be thought of. You can't ruin the whole show for some beavered old gentleman who turns up from the back of beyond like

Rip Van Winkle. If he's waited all these years he can wait *one* more night."

"Cynthia, I am really sorry, but I am afraid—"

"Uncles will do *any* time," decreed Miss Oddley, "but we can't have our special little party. Something has got to be evolved; something must. Why not bring Uncle Tom? We can push him off to bye-byes afterwards, before things become not quite suitable for him."

"Yes, why not?" put in young Lord Oddley; "if he's set his mind on dining with Margaret—well, let him! That's all right. Let him dine with Margaret and everybody else. Make it the Ritz. You'll all come along, won't you, everybody here?" He turned his dollish gilt head from one side to another of the crowd in the smothering satchet of a room.

"That will make it all right, Mrs. Verity, won't it?"

Poor Mrs. Verity evidently considered it would be anything but all right.

Her Uncle Tom? The kind old friend of her cottage days? Arriving in England for the first time in ten years, and finding himself a guest, not at a homely little family reunion, but at a Ritzian orgy of a score at least of the modern young? A banquet the young host of which he would never before have seen and the hostess of which . . . *What* would he make of Miss Monocle?

All these thoughts I could read, even in the roseate gloom, passing behind the face of my old friend. It became increasingly anxious. I believe, now, that already on that afternoon Mrs. Verity knew that she was approaching the end of her tether.

Margaret, pulling herself out of her divan, made her way through the cigarette smoke that wavered and closed behind her like a river current. She perched her bony young frame on the wide arm of her mother's chair.

"Vi dear," she said plaintively, "you've *got* to manage this. I really cannot face this heavy family life stunt of this heavy family dinner with Uncle Tom. *Either* you must have him here all to yourself, *à deux*—"

"My pet, it's you he wants to see. He hasn't seen you, he says, since you were a tiny girl in a navy-blue—"

"Oh, Violet, *spare* us!"

"How *shrieking*; the idea of Margaret, tiny, and in navy blue! Hadn't the dear old gentleman better keep his memories undisturbed by Margaret in her new Egyptian?"

"Vi, if you won't have him alone, you must make him come to Claude and Cynthia's party at the Ritz."

" 'Yes, he goes to the Ritz,
Where he sits and sits,
That's why they call him Vamping Tom!' "

sang another young man. Gales of laughter greeted this effort. In the hubbub I saw Margaret steal her lean young arm about her mother's neck and whisper frenziedly through clouds of her own cigarette smoke; begging in the manner of one who has only to command. I wondered what arrangement would be come to about that party?

5

Presently that arrangement was announced.

Uncle Tom's home-welcoming was to take place at the Ritz. Everybody was to come. I found myself included. As curiosity remains the keynote of my being, I accepted. Everybody was to come, but it was to be Margaret's party. All of us, including Uncle Tom, were to be Margaret's guests.

"And you," added Mrs. Verity to a young man who had been sitting close beside her with his back to the lamp so that I got his head only as a black blot against a dimly purple disc. "You'll come?"

"Thank you so much; I shall be delighted."

"And you, Eric," Margaret was commanding, "and Stumpy and Freckles and Prince. Well, thank heavens I shall at least have my *friends* about me to help me to live through my *relations*. That's one small mercy, isn't it, Cynthia?"

Cynthia Oddley, I noticed, had not looked too pleased with the arrangement. She turned her sharp profile towards the brother who was a less intelligent version of herself, and I heard her mutter something to him about "a fearful curse. . . . What about afterwards? . . . have to say you're driving her home—"

"And bring her along?" muttered the brother.

"Obviously bring her along."

"Even then, they will wonder why—"

"Oh, Claude, don't be such a goddam fool about everything. Time to think things out before then, won't there? . . . Shut up, can't you," whispered the sister

between her teeth. I got the green glint of that monocle flashed suspiciously upon me. Something in the look of the unmonocled eye I liked no better. Already, indeed, that girl gave me a feeling of discomfort. Already I knew that she knew that I had caught that word "afterwards," and had wondered what it meant.

Without reason, there flashed upon me then and there an impression of this girl friend of Margaret. Cynthia Oddley, young as she was, seemed to me to have a look of one other person whom I had known. This other person had slipped into the grip of a repellent habit. This other person had begun by flirting with drugs, experimentalizing with this narcotic and that stimulant. This person had ended up as the loser in a particularly horrible struggle.

Details of that struggle began to crowd in upon my memory.

But they were details I had had to make myself forget.

I dismissed them now. It was too wild a thought, must be a trick of my own imagination!

I took my leave and went downstairs; followed by one of the other callers—the young man who had been sitting with his back to the light.

6

Outside, there was a bit of a November fog on.

But heavens! how fresh it felt, in comparison. What a relief to get out into it, after that stifling den I had left, thick with scent and smoke, tea, cocktails, bril-

liantine, Oriental draperies, face powder, bull terrier, hyacinths and humanity mingled!

What a relief, too, after that babel of contradictory chatter, to find oneself answering the pleasant voice of one quite different young man!

I hadn't caught his name. Was he one of Margaret's bodyguard? He seemed older. He seemed, as I say, different.

Quite a modern! He had the clothes, the waisty figure, the haircut of the others. But he had not joined in the "mouldy" competition, or in the contest as to which of them had been in bed for the fewest hours during the last eighteen months. He had only talked a little, and that quite casually, about the races. Not that I caught if he had been to the races with the others. I didn't see his face until we got into the street. He carried an overcoat, but I noticed that, although it was a cold day, he did not put it on.

All about him there was something I now realize as an open-air effect. He suggested open spaces, wind, freshly moving waters and (unless this were one's imagination) a fearless frankness of mind.

He was a big young man, but he moved lightly and well, as do so many of these well-proportioned heavy-weights.

"Are you going my way?" he asked.

His manner was friendly and pleasant. "Good. May I walk along with you? What time do you make it? Ah! Then I shall just catch the jeweller's before they close. As he walked he confided to me that he had to go and

see about a ring. He smiled a little, adding, pleasantly: "Yes; it *is* an engagement ring, if you were going to ask that. But, no; it isn't to choose one. The fact is my fiancée has dropped a stone out of hers and I want to see if they can match it."

So he was engaged?

I found myself wondering, in the idle way one does wonder, what the fiancée was like; if she were a pretty girl? She was quite a lucky one, I thought. This was a most pleasant young man. I judged him to be about nine and twenty. In the lights of the street lamps as we passed he seemed clean-featured, and for colouring what I have heard described as "the false dark." For, though his hair was almost as black as his tie and though his brows were dark and thick, his skin, instead of being appropriately swarthy to go with that very dark hair, was light and slightly freckled. Also, when he looked straight at you it was obvious even by artificial light that his eyes were, normally, of the purest blue. Possibly you think that such details could not become apparent during a seven minutes' walk along a London street at twenty minutes to six of a November evening? Ah! A man reader then? As a woman, one naturally noticed all these trivialities that I have mentioned; together with several others, such as his lack of fuss over the stone lost from that ring. Many people might have been superstitious about that mishap. I noticed, too, something vaguely of the sea about his whole bearing.

I wondered if he had known Captain Verity? Presently I asked him this. He told me: "No, I never met him.

Never met any of them before. It was my brother, the soldier, who met them. My name's Mount."

"Ah!" I said, suddenly realizing that he must be the brother of that young man who had travelled with the Veritys on that fateful journey between Lewes and London.

He told me: "I've been abroad. I hadn't seen any of the family. Except the old man. That's their uncle Tom that we are all supposed to be dining with on the twenty-second. I ran across him in Argentina once. Oh, I have had reams of correspondence, of course, with Mrs. Verity. That's a charming woman."

I said something conventional about her being an old friend whom I had not seen for a number of years.

Young Mount replied: "Then you haven't seen the girl since she was grown up."

"Margaret? No, I haven't seen her since she was grown up."

He flashed a sideways look at me, as if to probe with those blue eyes what I thought of the girl, of her house, of her manner, of her associates, of the plan for the dinner on the twenty-second, and of the situation generally.

Obviously he saw what I thought.

He gave a little upward fling of his chin. I think there must have been the flicker of a smile, but we weren't passing a street lamp just then, so I cannot be sure.

He said only: "So that's Margaret Verity. What a mess!"

CHAPTER III

DINNER AT THE RITZ

1

DINNER at the Ritz meant a series of surprises—but not those for which I was prepared.

I had anticipated a devastating reaction of Margaret and Co. upon Mr. Lloyd-Rip Van Winkle. I didn't foresee the setback provided by Rip Van Winkle himself.

He said none of the expected things about being all at sea in this modern Babylon that seemed like another world to an old-fashioned duffer like him. . . .

His first quietly uttered contribution was: "The Ritz, eh? I gathered the Ritz wasn't so amusing just now? These places vary so month by month, I am given to understand? One week, they tell me, Claridge's is the only restaurant. Then you don't meet another human being there. All at the Berkeley. Surely some of these young people want to dance? Then why aren't we at the Embassy? Surely some of them belong? Well, as you have made all arrangements now, Violet my dear, why not dine at the Ritz and go on to dance somewhere alive?"

Not bad, was it, for a so-called beaver from the backwoods? To look at he was pleasantly keen-featured, sunburnt to a rich chestnut brown, and clean-shaven. Not a hair on his face. Plenty on his head—a massive,

shapely head, covered by that inordinate mass of white hair, strong, bushy, crisp as lichen. Closer-growing patches of lichen formed his eyebrows. Under these twinkled bright eyes as of a boy who is sailing his first model yacht. His actual age was an active, vigorous sixty-three and the business which had kept him so long in South America had to do with shipping: I believe I caught the word "intercoastal."

(Here I apologize for being femininely vague. The "business" side of men I can only give in terms which I have heard them use. Generally I have forgotten. So I may misquote. Presently, perhaps all women will become accurate and knowledgeable about these activities and professions of men, just as, for instance, men themselves have become *au fait* with the terminology of women's dress. No longer does a man say, "I didn't see what she had on; seemed to be something fluffy or diaphanous. Chiffon, d'you call it?" Nowadays the youthful male observer knows instantly whether "it" was of georgette or piece-lace, how it was made, and from which Molyneux model it was copied.)

To cut this cackle and to come to that dark horse, Uncle Tom: his height was not more than five feet eight. He gave the impression of being the same height and chest measurement all over. (A compact build, I believe it is called? Or, as men say, a useful sort of shape to have? I didn't mind his collar being (as Cynthia Oddley afterwards complained) the size of a waist belt that could have girdled a second Uncle Tom. His black, watered-silk ribbon and bunch of seals I liked. I liked the demureness with which this white-haired pirate sat back

in his chair, said little, but with glances as quick and furtive as the flick of a lizard's tongue, took in . . . everything.

2

We did not have a private room at the Ritz.

Cynthia had decreed that a long table in the restaurant, where you could look at all the other diners, would be so much more amusing.

Our party was, of course, the Veritys; the bunch of post-war lads I'd met ten days before in the Veritys' padded room; myself; the Uncle Tom; and that big, graceful, gentle-voiced young man who had walked down Hill Street with me, that modern who had seemed somehow different from the others—young Mr. Mount. He sat opposite to me. I sat between Uncle Tom and one of Margaret's bodyguard who had the distinction of being (when in clubs, restaurants, or walking down Piccadilly) constantly mistaken for the Prince of Wales.

Table talk seemed at first to be less in the form of dialogue than of the indistinguishable orchestration which had filled the padded room. One caught, to begin with, only such scraps as:

“—BLAST ye, scum! Where you sitting here first night of Thought he was Marvellous rotten Nelson Keys oh do look at that lunching at the Sports' Club Cochran's new show MAR-vellous Dempsey woman over there just like Coming off Wednesday night what Margaret's frock Phyllis Titmuss no the next table not there; *there!* awful-looking crowd of people here 'night Eric what? I WHAT?—”

Meanwhile Uncle Tom talked to me in bass undertones of the wonderful trip he had had across from Rio.

"There's nothing like a sea voyage," I caught, watching that pirate eye roving the Ritz. It quested about that over-gilded restaurant. It brought back, to the brain that was its base, much booty of amusement. I longed to know what Uncle Tom thought of it all, of the changes in decorations, the new lighting, the new fashions, the new hairdo, the more pronounced make-up on Englishwomen's faces since he was last at home? But with that twinkle in his eye (and in his voice) he continued to describe "the weather all the way over . . . the perfect blue . . . the birds that followed . . . Dolphins, too. Playing about in the waves, you know. Gambolling around the ship; schools of them. Schools of the creatures—" with another glance around.

Probably he had summed up in his mind the character and the job of every man at every table within range, as well as the jobs and characters of Margaret's body-guard. With those hectically bright youths he got on well, talking to them of motor launches, sea-going yachts. I could almost hear him thinking all the while: "Now, what are these? Young Oddley? Congenital idiot, but can't help looking like a gentleman. Is he the only one left of that family? Wonder what he will make of the place? . . . That youngster talking to Margaret looks honest enough; but they say he's going to read for the bar. That other fellow with the red hair. Father got money, I expect. That engineer. Hope he gets on, but everywhere is so crowded in the engineering world." I saw him exchange a very friendly nod across the table with young Mount.

Then he said to me: "*That's* the man of this push."

I thought he was going to discuss it, but he went on to speak of one Pacific cruise when he, a lad of seventeen, had worked his way before the mast.

His eyes were then on Margaret. What did he make of her? He said nothing. Didn't even look it. Only I, sitting on his other hand, felt undercurrents of comment swirling in the heated air towards that worn-and-weary-looking young girl.

Margaret's small, heavily decorated face seemed, even since the other day, to have shrunk; while her eyes had grown. To me she looked older. Or was it the dress?

3

Other times, other dresses!

Once, a débutante of Margaret's age was required to dimple like a peach in a "surround" of cobwebby white lace. That had its charm. Subsequent fashions have had theirs. Four years ago an evening dress would have displayed the whole of Margaret's back down to the waist, a fashion which at least served the purpose of getting girls to tend their skins more thoroughly than they did in "modester" days.

But now the décolletage of the moment allowed the merest straight line underneath those painfully prominent collar bones. A trying line! One out of which only the plumpest, the most pearly-white neck could emerge triumphant; according to old-fashioned views. Also, according to those views, there was something too bizarre for a quite-young girl about Margaret's "Egyptian."

Remember, this was in the November before those world-found excavations had brought modes of Luxor into every tube lift and Lyons tea-shop. Later, Cynthia would never have permitted Margaret to assume a fashion so inexpensive. So, at that time her "new Egyptian" was really original.

No other woman at the Ritz that night had encased her face in a Sphinx headdress surmounted by a serpent of old Nile. None other had hung softly gleaming discs upon her chest. Not one showed those Cleopatra draperies wrapped about the loins, caught up, and then falling to the immense golden tassel between the ankle bones. Personally I thought that style might have suited Cynthia. One finds that, when other people dress their friends, those friends are often clad in something that would accentuate the type, not of the wearer, but of the chooser.

Miss Oddley herself wore the gown in which she sat for her portrait by Mr. John: a straight petunia-coloured garment, in cut not unlike those shifts which are an issue of the Turkish baths. Transparent from mid-calf, it trailed in front over her many-strapped shoes of petunia satin and platinum. It dragged two yards of train, six inches wide, behind her. One lank white arm was bare, the other sleeve to the finger tips in heliotrope georgette. To-night her inevitable monocle gleamed in harmonizing purple.

I glanced at Uncle Tom when he was introduced—he had not turned a hair at the eyeglass or at anything else about the young woman. Personally, I liked her even less at second sight.

She was what used to be called (when I was young and had no sense) "the life and soul of the party."

With purple cigarette holder wagging away between vermilion lips, she talked and talked and talked, while Margaret hung on her words. Margaret's bodyguard admired Cynthia second only to Margaret herself. Cynthia was a personality and a power. What she said went. Cynthia was an influence in the lives of all, from her gaping brother even to suppressed Mrs. Verity. Yet to me that girl possessed none of the stuff of girlhood. Her talk of shows and of the just-published "*Garçonne*," of Gwen Farrar, Charlot, Lady Diana, and that story of *why* Teddie Gerard wouldn't wear her jewellery; her gown, her monocle, her attitude, her interests, her whole atmosphere suggested, not natural high spirits, not even natural frivolity, but something deliberate. Something made up in beauty parlour, studio party and—yes—opium dens. She was artificiality incarnate.

In place of that overcharge of youth which is a laughing, bubbling-over mountain stream, Cynthia Oddley's gaiety seemed a calculated uprush as of chemicals.

It seemed to vitalize the party. They followed her lead, and I felt that the girl had still something "up" that modish left-hand sleeve of hers.

Even with this ultra-modern Cynthia the twinkling Uncle Tom was at his ease, exchanging remarks about dancing on board ship on the various lines. But all the time I felt that the quality of Cynthia was no more lost upon the old sailor than were the items on the menu.

4

“Nothing like sea air for giving one the appetite of a wolf,” he told me anon. “I seem to be the biggest eater here; or the only one. My niece used to be a little sweet tooth. Not making much of a meal, is she? Off her oats.”

That I had noticed.

Anything but a sweet tooth was Margaret Verity tonight! In the lounge she had taken her Martinis (two of these) dry. Her champagne dry. Between every course she nibbled at salted almonds, just as between every course she smoked (out of her long ivory holder) heavily scented cigarettes. No soup; a flake or so of richly sauced fish. A morsel of bird. She refused ice pudding. She left half of the savoury. As far as I could see she had only “let herself go” over the *hors d'œuvres*, that crowded array of little dishes gaudy-coloured as a futurist's palette. Dishes of chopped-up crimson, of livid green, of sulphur-yellow-sprinkled-with-scarlet, of nacre-and-steel, of blood-red and cream; these were all highly spiced, salt, acid, vinegary, *pimentés* in the extreme. Morsels of stimulation for the jaded appetites of elderly dyspeptics one would have thought. But it was of these that the girl of nineteen made her meal.

Other times, other appetites!

While I sat there, outwardly consulting the menu, I reviewed foods that had seemed good to the tennis-playing, beagle-following, cross-country-running parents of those diners, say twenty-five years ago.

I thought of beef gravy on Sunday, Vandyke brown,

and piping hot Yorkshire pudding, how crisp outside! how soft-hearted within!

Green peas: the *first!* Immense, succulent globes, greener than anything that grows: cooked with a little sugar and with a dark green, utterly limp garland of what had once been mint and which had given up all its soul of flavour to make more perfect perfection itself!

Carrots! Fresh carrots chopped up into very small dice, put into a tea-cup, turned out like sand pies! No sauce, no mess over them! *lovely* they were. . . .

Roly-poly pudding! Ah, featherlight of suet! Oozing lusciously with garnet-red damson jam! Bland cream on the top of that! Some of them would even add sugar to the lavish helpings of roly-poly pudding with cream, that they were given at home.

At school, of course, there had been an expurgated austerer version of this food of the gods. . . .

Forgetful for an instant of the century we live in, I leant back to chuckle to Violet Verity.

“Do you remember ‘Boiled Baby’?”

“I’m afraid I *never* back horses,” murmured Margaret’s mother absently through the zoo of chatter. Heaven knew what she thought I’d been talking about!

Anon I was thinking of brown bread; moist, crusty, delicious, with immense wobs of farmhouse butter spread above!

I thought of porridge for breakfast: oatmeal porridge, thoroughly cooked, in which a child’s horn spoon can excavate galleries and channels and reservoirs into which to drop, endlessly slow, the moulted amber of syrup. . . . How greedy we used to be about our food! When I say

“we” I include the tiny Margaret Verity that I had known. For all these foods had been put before her. On all these had she thriven, in all these had she taken a growing child’s healthy delight.

I thought—

Do not imagine, please, that I sat there at the Ritz, silent, deaf, oblivious of all the gaiety around me and of the food before me while I conjured up these visions of twenty-year-old schoolroom menus; oh, no. One must indeed have an inactive mind that cannot, simultaneously, pursue its private meditations, catch fragments of the general babel—

“—FRIGHTF’LY overworked as usual ha HA going on the films bright as Death sitting next to Mrs. scent you’ve got on Cynthia? the Big Fight oh! something extra-voluptuous of Babani’s not going on the FILMS? well did you see him in *Le Moment Après* never got time to at Lou’s the chemists. But my Dear! Russian Ballet Varsity match suffering from chronic overwork ha ha always such wonderful cooking at the Sitting to Epstein? No? not a soul here to-night what Peter Quennell’s verse read the translation Oh, my God! when I’m so overworked that Heard the one about the Ha, ha, ha! Tell Margaret: overWORKed? Tell Margaret MARgaret—”

—and carry on a dialogue with one’s dinner neighbour!

5

Other times, other topics!

Now, a youth of the age of Margaret’s friend the Prince’s double, my dinner neighbour on my left—about

what would he, in other days, have conversed to me? About my rheumatism, I suppose, and about what his own poor dear mother did for hers. That is, if he was a kind-hearted lad. If not, he wouldn't have talked at all until there was a girl available to flirt with him. But since we lived in this century when so few mothers know what rheumatism means, and when the world has spun down several further ringing grooves of change, this fair-haired, pretty-faced boy seemed pleased to have his remarks listened to by any woman at all.

"D'you know," he confided, "I don't get on with girls?"

"Must I believe that?"

"Fact, I assure you. I don't seem to have any *use* for the girl of the present day."

"Sad—for her!"

"Please don't rag. I mean it. Wish I didn't," complained the Prince's double, or one of His Royal Highness's countless doubles. It is to our nation's score that this sporting, boyish-blond type pervades these islands. "I think it's rotten that one can't find a pretty girl who's jolly, and magnetic, and got something in her head as well. None of these girls one meets takes the slightest interest in anything except 'Been to any shows lately?' and 'What d'you think of my frock?'" They never read anything but fashion papers. They never do a hand's turn for anybody else—I don't mean Margaret, she's a wonderful girl of course," he put in, hastily blushing. I surmised that Margaret or Cynthia had snubbed him lately, hence his censure of the modern girl.

The modern boy pursued: "They're so *dashed* selfish. They never listen to anything a man says—"

“Ah, is that it?”

“No, *no*.” He laughed and blushed again: he was quick enough and not unengaging. “You think it’s merely because men always want to talk about themselves and have to have listeners, which girls won’t *be*, any more? It’s not only that. Girls think they can be as rude as they like. It’s a fact. Give you an example. The other night my mater and I had got up a party of six to dine and dance; booked the table. It was my mater’s party. She herself had asked the girl; yes, there was one special girl she knew I was keen on getting. Girl accepted. She’s a girl who goes about a tremendous lot, always has crowds of men—”

(“Margaret,” I thought, “in spite of what he says.”)

“—and I did think it was just possible that she might cry off a day or two before if something more amusing happened to turn up. Well, she didn’t. The very day though—just as we were starting off—the car was at the door! My mater was just putting on her cloak—the telephone rang. A man’s voice said, ‘Is that Mrs. So-and-So’s house? Yes? This is to say that Miss —— (the girl) won’t be able to dine to-night. Good-bye.’ There we were a girl short!”

(“Margaret” I thought.)

“When I called next day, no saying she was sorry, nothing of that sort. Simply: ‘Oh, Mr. So-and-So insisted on taking me off to the new show at Dalys; quite good.’ No note to my mother. Nothing. I had a good mind to carry on the same way, to-night, about her party,” declared the Prince’s double, thus giving himself away completely as being sore yet still enslaved to the

girl who had so treated him. "Don't *you* call it dashed rude?"

6

The girl thus censured was sitting opposite at the table between the red-haired Eric and Lord Oddley.

The dollish young man had lifted a finger and pointed to Margaret's pearl string. I don't know what he said about it. I heard Margaret's listless-sounding reply (yes; this had been the little child who used to laugh so much, to laugh so that the cottage echoed and rang with the joyous rippling sound!):

"Isn't it a beastly nuisance?" she drawled. "Can't think what happens. Some of them are losing absolutely all their lustre. And look, this little one at the end by the clasp. He's going as black as ink!"

"Well, if you won't wash your neck—" ragged the boy Eric. "Of course, if young Margaret *won't* wash her neck, what do you expect?"

Other times, other compliments.

The Erics of Violet Verity's day (or, say, of the day of Violet's mother) might have turned something graceful about all pearls looking dark against such a throat. "To what, my love, shall I compare thine eyne? Crystal is muddy," complained the Elizabethan. These Neo-Georgians ran the joke *rather* a long time about Margaret's refusing to wash her neck.

"Not that unwashed necks are the *trouble* with pearls. On the contrary: I'll tell you something about that," Cynthia Oddley now took the floor, everybody leaning

forward to listen, as she rattled away. "A pal of mine on the stage had won some perfectly lovely pearls, and, frightful tragedy! she's one of those people who simply don't suit pearls. I don't mean she does not *look* very sweet in them, she's a dream of exquisite beauty as a matter of fact. You *must* meet her. Looks like a Domerque trailing about, the most lovely, *evil* expression; it's not that. It is that there is something in her that seems to *upset* pearls. I saw her the other day, with her string on, and they were looking marvellous. . . . I said: 'Why; you said pearls turn all beastly on you after you have worn them a certain time, but these are looking perfectly *divine* just now!' She said: 'Oh, yes, Cynthia; they have just been *done*.' I said: 'Been done? How do you mean?' And she told me what she did for them. She knows a perfectly ghastly old woman, an old Jewess in Hoxton, and she takes the pearls to her, and this fat old, grimy, greasy crone puts the string round her fat greasy neck (all buried in the middle of her chins and things, I suppose!) and wears them without shifting them for about three days and three nights. And then they get back their lustre, and last, quite all right, for some time; and when they go bad again, this girl I know takes them back and has them done again, and so on. I might find out who the hag is and, Peggy, you can get her to do yours."

"Oh, Cynthia, must I? I'd hate having my string steeped in essence of Hoxton! Loathsome," drawled Margaret. "Still, something really drastic has got to be done. It isn't imagination that these are all turning dark. Pearls do go sick, don't they, Uncle Tom?"

He replied with a short nod: "Certainly. Pearls do go sick, Margaret."

Was there a note of double meaning in the voice of this man? Margaret in her perverse way was liking her Uncle Tom. I guessed she minded what he thought. She wanted him to agree. She saw that he didn't.

Then from his place opposite to me, young Mr. Mount suggested: "I've been told that the cure for sick pearls is sea water. Didn't the Queen of Italy once confide some valuable pearls to the British Navy to take charge of while they were immersed for a—"

"I shall try warm milk," Margaret's drawl interrupted imperiously his pleasant voice. "Lots of people say wash them in warm milk and leave them in the sun. Not that there is any sun nowadays."

"Not that Margaret would see it if there were! Ha, ha! How can she if she won't get up until the sun's gone down?"

"Oh, shut up, Eric, you ass," snapped the girl crossly; "just because I was in bed until yesterday with 'flu'—"

"You in bed?"

"Yes, I was. I'd a temperature of one hundred and four." (No wonder I had thought her looking worn and older.) "And I think it is a jolly sporting effort of me to have got up at all to-day, instead of crashing the party. I don't believe any of you would have done it; would they, Violet?"

"And you oughtn't to have," said Mrs. Verity, unhappily. "You ought by rights to have stayed in bed until—"

"Oh, bed!" pouted Margaret. "Bed's loathsome, except in the morning! Bed at any other time bores me to tear-

less, racking sobs. I say, you people! Are we going to stay here in this haunting restaurant for ever? Why isn't the waiter bringing any coffee? Odds, why don't you compel that waiter? You're as hopeless with serfs. Odds . . . yes, of course I'll have a liqueur. I jolly well need it. I'll have a *fine* to buck myself up. . . ."

"Why do they all have to drink like fish?" Uncle Tom asked me, *sotto voce*. "Not vitality enough to keep 'em going without? In my day, one went to parties of youngsters and found a lot of gabble and giggling, and silly, jolly, bubbling gaiety, always. All on soft drinks; anyhow, for the girls! Perfectly cheery, they were on lemonade, tea and coffee, claret cup. Nowadays . . . parties of youngsters . . . but it's done on cocktails and pegs and liqueurs, now. Don't seem to get any 'go' into themselves unless they get some drink in too. Not even the youngest of this bunch! Why?"

"Nonsense, Vi. *You're* a pussyfoot," Margaret was scolding her mother. "Yes, you are. A pussyfoot and a food faddist. Check it . . . a double *fine* I'll have. Tell him, Odds. Two green chartreuses, a benedictine, seven Grand Marniers, a cointreaux; the usual for you, Cynthia, I suppose?"

"Nothing for you, Vi? Nor for you? Very well: that's that. And a large double *fine* for mademoiselle. . . ."

7

"And now for heaven's sake buck up and get a move on," Margaret commanded her guests, "if we ever intend to push on and dance."

There was dancing at the Ritz: a delicious band, a good floor. But, such is the tyranny of Fashion! That dancing room to the left of the long corridor as we filed out of the restaurant was practically empty. Margaret had voted for the Berkeley. We should find it packed, I knew, but never mind. It was just across Piccadilly, behind the rose-flame curtains of the big white Berkeley, that "Everybody" would be found to-night.

Consequently it was well worth the fifteen shillings a head that Miss Verity would pay for her party.

As we crowded into the jam-and-cream-coloured vestibule under the clustered crystal chandeliers, Cynthia Oddley darted a compelling look at her brother. She rapped out a "Claude!"

Obediently the young man went up to her. Mutters were exchanged.

Again, all that reached me was the word "afterwards"; and again, I had an uneasy presentiment about their plan.

CHAPTER IV

DANCE AT THE BERKELEY

1

OTHER times, other dances.

But these have been so often described. For once you shall be spared the jeremiad. . . . "While everything else has speeded up dancing has slowed down. . . . None of these odious negroid noises can for one instant compare with the languorous three-time waltz tune of dear dead days" (days when the mourners themselves were modern young). There shall be the merest mention only of how "no modern girl can dream what delight it was to dance down a program of fourteen and fifteen of those waltzes, or how it felt, in the Lancers, to be carried off one's feet, swung around like a toy by the strong arm of a partner such as you simply don't see nowadays; and allowed to alight, softly as a blossom falling from a height on to the glossy surface of a stream. . . . No room in these disgusting crushes for anything of that sort. . . . No poetry of motion in a modern ballroom. . . . Ah, dancing isn't dancing nowadays. It's simply doing Euclid and arithmetic with your feet"—thus the chief mourners of the days that are no more.

Well, it's easier to think that modern youth is inferior, than to admit that the thinker is neither modern nor young any more. There is a mind which says of each

new fashion in amusements, games, music, art and dream, "The old is better"; but to keep up is more difficult than to criticize.

All the same, the dancing of that evening was spoilt by overcrowding. Only with the tiniest of careful foot-steps could the dancers circle round the room at all. Shoes were trodden on. Shoulders brushed. Tulle hip-draperies were flattened. The hair-ornament of another girl, caught in Margaret's golden-banded Sphinx head-dress, took moments to disentangle.

Uncle Tom sat back and cocked his eye upon that quietly eddying, that somewhat anxious-faced throng.

Aloud he said: "You ought to see some of those Argentine tango dancers. Wonderful!" He looked again at those English girls and boys, and his flickering glance launched all but audibly the word:

"Beginners."

(Partial collapse of all those English boys and girls within eyeshot.)

2

One other touch of frost: there were only two girls to a whole party of young men.

Other days, other averages.

In Violet Verity's coming-out season, to have "more men than girls there" used to be the dream of London hostesses. Always too many girls! (Some gifted American *diseuse* used to give a brief recitation intended to represent any English gathering: "How do you do, Molly? How d'you do, Diana? How d'you do, Grace?

How d'you do, Lily? How d'you do, Pam? How do you do, Enid? WHERE'S YOUR BROTHER?") Generally there were rows of wallflowers; planted there. But not here. Not now. Why? Too much foresight? Girls won't go to a dance except with dancing partners or when they know that partners will be provided. Young men, on the other hand, swarm to the music like bees to the sound of a beaten sauce-pan. Atavistically, I suppose, they conclude that there must be plenty of girls. Be that as it may, that bodyguard of highly presentable young dancing men took it in turns to sit out while Margaret and Cynthia danced.

Margaret's mother, who had not danced since the last waltz with her Jack, remarked to young Mr. Mount, sitting out beside her: "Such a pity that your fiancée wasn't able to come! She would have been one more girl!"

"Hardly a complimentary way of summing any lady up, Violet!" put in Uncle Tom disconcertingly twinkling.

Whereat our hostess's mother coloured in a way that reminded me of Margaret's sudden vivid childish blush; and Mr. Mount murmured something pleasant about his fiancée's hope to meet Mrs. Verity later on.

I had now realized what made Mr. Mount "different."

His fellow-moderns here might conceivably have been at a loss without their accustomed background of jazz civilization. One could not conceive of Mr. Mount at a loss anywhere. His neat dark head, his fair-skinned clever face could be pictured appropriately set off by the most gorgeous of levee uniforms. A toilworn, greasy boiler suit would seem equally appropriate on that big, graceful body of his. With all the difference in occupa-

tion and surroundings that that difference of garb expresses, Mr. Mount would be "at home" in either.

I watched him dancing (particularly well) with Miss Oddley. He looked like one of the artistic pen-and-ink drawings with which Mr. Denis Bradley embellishes his advertisements. He talked sufficiently at dinner, although his conversation seemed the pattern on some Japanese parasol, held up to hide the colour of the user's eyes. The talk of women in company is often this. The duty conversation of men, when they are not giving you their thoughts, is less like a pretty parasol than a dully damp umbrella, of which spokes get you in the eye. Mr. Mount's absentmindedness did not take the form of dropping syllables off words, or the other form of that glazed stare which means that all but the actual body is far, far away. Only, well! He kept himself in the background.

3

Presently I found myself dancing again with the Prince's double, that lad with a grievance.

He continued even more bitterly his indictment of modern girls.

"Everything bores them," he told me. "Bored at home. Bored when they are taken out. I'm beginning to see why so many fellows hang about after women of"—here he obviously did rapid mental arithmetic and gave up the answer—"women older than themselves. Girls wonder why. Well, that's it. Men still want a woman

to be a woman. Not just a mannequin who smears red wax on her lips and hates the thought of—”

“Thought of what?”

“Getting it smeared off again, I suppose. Do you know, to be perfectly frank, these girls are physically cold? They’re cold as mutton.”

“Oh, come!”

“They are. They’ve no earthly use for men, except to go about with. Do you know, they shy at getting engaged? Stick to one fellow for keeps? Not a hope,” the indictman ran on. “It’s all a matter of money. All. If by chance they do get hold of somebody who is well enough off to make it worth their while to marry him, no matter if he is a measly rat of a thing or if he is old enough to be their father, then they will freeze onto him like grim death. But, by gad! even then how they shirk—if you don’t mind my calling a spade a spade?—how utterly they do bar the idea of babies. Which my mater was quite keen upon when she was a girl, I believe,” he added, his young voice dropping wistfully from the note of tirade. “These girls—do you know what they call babies? They call them ‘the God forbids.’ Not only that, they *mean* it. Don’t you think something must be radically wrong?”

I answered: “Let me tell you about one girl I knew—during-the-war girl. Not this latest crop, but still fairly modern. Now she barred the idea of babies. She said to me: ‘Imagine going through all that! Those ghastly months! Giving up everything, dancing, riding and going about; losing one’s figure, never being able to get into

a decent frock, looking too, *too unspeakable!* And after all that, to *crown* it all, having—what? Not a pearl string (which would be worth it). Not a diamond bar; not even a new tortoiseshell-fitted dressing case. No. Having a nasty, squally, damp, disgusting *baby!* Only that.’ ”

(Other times, other topics indeed.)

“Exactly,” said the pseudo Prince of Wales; “just what I meant. All alike, these modern girls. No decent womanly instincts. What are they coming to?”

“What this particular girl came to,” I told him just as the encore came to an end, “was getting gaily married and having two babies. Splendid little boys they were. She’s simply devoted to them. If I were you, I shouldn’t worry too much about the instincts of the modern girl!” All the same, I was not too sure that this history of my girl friend would repeat itself in the case of a Margaret Verity.

There she fox-trotted, wearing her modernized version of finery worn by that Egyptian flirt whom age could not wither nor custom stale . . . what garb could have seemed less appropriate for this wilting child?

I watched that head of an imitation Sphinx between other heads as the dancers circled by under the subdued and glowing lights. I watched her face. Blank as a Benda mask, and as painted! The make-up was not the worst of the trouble. Assumed by so young a girl, that sticky lip carmine, caking illusion powder, clogging eyelash black and smear of hyacinth blue on the eyelids might have seemed a piquant disguise had they decorated a face rounded, satin-skinned and gay. But, under the

maquillage and even in the becoming light, Margaret was drawn, sallow, strained. Worse; she was bored. The pursuit of pleasure? This was the pursuit all right, but where was the pleasure that should have lighted her up? Where the appropriate bubbling gaiety? Once, circling near me, she laughed through the music. That shrill gust of mirth didn't reach her eyes. Peevish, her small oval face peeped over the shoulder of one admirer after another. Claude, Eric, Freckles, Stumpy, Prince. . . . Admirers, with one or other and all of whom this girl spent day after day of her unchaperoned life!

4

Other times, other chaperons.

How dragonishly, once, was the young girl guarded! That reckless adventurer, Sir Richard Burton, took up chalk and tremulously wrote upon the wall for the eyes of a girl to whom he was not yet introduced, but who was to sway his life: "May I speak to you?" His Isabel (already prepared to follow him over all Asia) dared not yet break tradition. In turn she took up the chalk: "No; Mamma would not like it." Later they lived one of the world's romances.

By Isabel Burton's mamma the pagan element of sex was dreaded like fire, electricity, flood—forces that destroy continents, even if they also serve homes. Not for nothing were barriers set. To-day those barriers seem like the Roman sea wall—half a mile inland beyond high-water mark. Practically any youth of her class can arrange (if he so desires) to get to know practically any

maid. Practically any girl goes about as she chooses with men friends at practically any hour.

Young people will be young people, they tell you, they have always been the same—but the circumstances of their lives are no longer the same. Rebel hearts beat in Victoria's reign, but there were no side-cars then. Side-cars, night club, and sport have influenced the association of the eternally discussed young. These now read what they choose of hair-raising fiction or blood-curdling facts (either, in our great-grandchildren's eyes, may appear incredibly tame). To-day they discuss the ill-named Freud and any sex problem together. Side by side they sit through plays excavated from the Restoration period or evolved by Mittel-Europa. Incessantly they dance and, if not cheek to cheek, that's merely because it's no longer the fleeting fad. Playing, working, they scarcely separate. No one sees the risk. . . . Certainly the old risk (namely, that boy and girl, thrown together, quickly flame into catastrophic passion) is not the risk for the girl in Margaret's circumstances.

Other times, other dangers.

Here there fits in a story I heard long afterwards from Uncle Tom.

He said: "There's rather a significant yarn about a couple of villages I once passed through up in the North of England. They faced each other on opposite banks of a dangerous stream. One of the villages had quite a reputation for pretty girls. The young fellows of the opposite village, when they were going courting, had to walk perhaps four or five miles round. In summer they used to swim, sometimes, across the ford. Anyhow, there

was always a lot of intermarrying. One or two youngsters had been drowned during flood time. Some benefactor left a sum of money to build a good hefty stone bridge across that stream. The will was carried out. The bridge is there now. Here is the curious part: There weren't any more marriages between the young people of the neighbouring villages. They were too near; they went elsewhere for their sweethearts."

To return to Margaret and her young man. Surely some girls must, in the course of weeks, have developed some tender preference? Some girls would have found attractive Eric's red hair and blithe "ragging"? Others would have "fallen for" the Prince's double? Others might have been impressed even by Claude's well-bred dollishness?

Yet—basically, not one of these young men "meant" more to his young queen than did the waiter or the saxophone player. This flattering bodyguard she "had to have" for her entertainment; just as she "had to have" her Rolls, Cynthia's vivacity, her Hill Street house, the constant stimulus of a thousand coloured, changing excitements. It took all these artificialities to give to Margaret Verity the faintest imitation of that thrill which races through a healthier girl when the young lover to whom she is, in primitive fashion, *attracted*, takes her hand for his dance.

Another waft of the boys' talk drifted through *The Kitten on the Keys*:

"—my tutor said fellow like yon girl I used to dance with Sandhurst at Eton get back to feeling like Death! Feeling like the 'IF' in *If Winter Comes* when I was at

my last crammer's I Lord I hope I when I was cramming at get back Oxford to-morrow depends upon partner you—"

Could it be because they were all so young? Was the man lost in the playfellow? What would happen if Margaret were dealing with a man her senior but still young, who should possess the charm of character as well as every lure of sex?

5

Mr. Mount came up. The thought dashed through me then it would serve Margaret right if she fell in love with this young man; engaged, out of her reach. Never mind. If he could cause her to feel anything—even unhappiness!—it would be to the good. . . . I doubt if on that evening Margaret noticed whether he were dark or fair.

He turned upon her his very pretty smile.

"We're going," he said regretfully. For such a big young man he had a peculiarly gentle voice. "I wanted so very much to dance with you, Miss Verity, and every time you have been engaged! And now we are going and I shall not have the chance."

Margaret turned her exquisite little sphinx-dressed head over her angular shoulder before going on with her arm locked in Cynthia's. Margaret's reply did not seem to disconcert the young man. To me it was a dash of cold water in the face.

She drawled: "Well! That's *your* loss, isn't it?" Then she went on.

6

I caught that bright, piratical eye of Uncle Tom.

He raised one lichen eyebrow. Then he and I had a tiny, memorable interlude of conversation. Jammed in the buzzing crowd at the door, we had to wait. As we did so he remarked in bass undertones that only I caught: "My young friend Mount was perfectly right about the cure for sick pearls. Salt water! That'll cure a pearl that's going black. A sea voyage," added Uncle Tom, as at last the crowd thinned sufficiently for us to get on and seek our wraps; "a sea voyage, and then—"

"Then?"

"Then a year on a desert island."

I saw little hope for his recipe. A desert island? *That* girl?

Six weeks later that girl was on that island.

Picture for one instant that contrast. Instead of packed, noisy rooms, that wide calm seascape, that sunset over the waves, that middle-distance of tawny sands, that foreground of rocks, wild greenery, red-starred cactus blooms!

Instead of that atmosphere reeking with humanity, food, overheated air, and scented clothes, the fresh yet gentle breath of the sea. Instead of a nervy girl, painted, dolled up, and standing there surrounded by young men, a girl bareheaded, barefooted, clad in a rough tattered skirt and a man's blue jersey, running along by the sea's edge with arms full of driftwood, face full of eagerness for life.

This "adventure" was coming nearer, nearer, with

every faint tick of the Chinese clock through the Veritys' London drawing-room, with every joyous beat of the waves upon that island beach. . . .

But to go back to that evening of dinner at the Ritz, dance at the Berkeley and the Oddleys' plan for "afterwards."

7

Later on, I was told that plan.

It was to take Margaret on to a certain Chelsea studio belonging to a friend of Cynthia's. I had heard about her, seen photographs in the *Bystander*. That winter she went in for wax sculpture. Also, for carving in wood and for painting (with white flesh tints, green lips, large blue eyes with green lashes) those grotesque heads afterwards sold as hat stands to show off the latest ideas at the *boutique fantasque* of an exotic milliner. This amateur of the bizarre was clever; petted by more than one society set. She had hobbies, however, which leave their mark. She had that curious look about the eyes, she had the leaden skin, the sometimes impossible finger nails, and the jumpy nerviness which are betrayals to a doctor's eye. She was of the type that is known in beauty parlours as being terribly difficult to massage into anything like the expected freshness. Yes, she had hobbies! She dabbled in experiments with many kinds of stimulants. She had acquired an opium pipe. She melted aspirins into some subtle punch of her own concocting. She drank "Coca liqueur," that tonic not yet

dropped upon by the faculty as dangerous . . . she sniffed ether . . . about her futuristically decorated studio she had little hiding-places for more obviously suspect commodities. Tiny boxes of that which look like the coarsest kitchen sugar. You may have seen it at your dentist's.

It was to this studio that the sculptress had invited Cynthia Oddley to bring "that very pretty girl who was so keen on cocaine just for once" and on seeing "if it were really as amusing as some of these people made out."

That girl was Margaret Verity.

The amusement which had died out of everyday life she was to be shown how to seek (as many others seek it) in a world of artificially induced dreams.

I don't know how much Claude Oddley knew of what that "afterwards" in the studio involved? I don't think he knew much. He was a soft-hearted fool of a boy; utterly swayed by his alert deliberately lively sister. She had arranged everything . . . she had arranged all details of carrying off Margaret when the dancing came to an end.

8

"What's Margaret up to now, with the noble lord and that sister of his?" added Uncle Tom in his deep undertone. "Why is she being driven by them instead of coming home in the Rolls?"

"Where are those girls?" This was from Margaret's mother, turning anxiously. "It's nearly three; aren't we

all ready to go? Where is Margaret? She was here in her coat a minute ago. Did she go back? Where's Cynthia?"

At that moment Cynthia Oddley, looking rather frightened, hurried out of the cloakroom, alone.

CHAPTER V

LOVE-MAKING À LA MODE

1

CYNTHIA'S plan had gone agley.

Even as Margaret with fur coat over Egyptian draperies had slipped back to the cloakroom to join her friend, and had pressed to the mirror, the lipstick in her fingers had fallen jangling among the trinketry that dropped to the end of her chain. Mists danced between Margaret and her reflection. She had only time to exclaim: "Cynthia! I—I'm feeling rotten—"

Gadding too soon after that influenza attack, she was now in the grip of a relapse.

So that was that, and not a bad thing either if you think of the alternative. . . .

As it was, it meant home for Margaret, a nurse at once, a Harley Street doctor, orders of bed for the next week.

2

What a trying week for Mrs. Verity!

Margaret, fractious as a grown-up man kept in bed, complained that the trained nurse frazzled her. So her mother tended her. During three days when the invalid's temperature was up, bells never ceased to trill through the house, nor feet of the young men to tramp up the staircase to the padded room.

Then the highly salaried Hill Street staff murmured louder than the children of Israel in the desert. With servants poor Mrs. Verity never had been able to cope. These knew that, as infallibly as children know upon whose necks they may trample. Cook sent up to say she didn't know she had been engaged to run so many extra meals a day, and how many would there be for dinner, please, as cook wasn't feeling at all the thing herself and the kitchen maid's evening out and all. Benson, the Sphinx, gave stately notice. Followed by housemaid and underhousemaid. The tweeny maid hovered in corridors and wept resentfully on landings where no tweeny maid should be. Among them all Mrs. Verity was at her wit's end, until her Uncle Tom arrived and—somehow—restored discipline.

"I'm a born interferer," he told me. "I've fixed the staff. The family of Oddley is past me so far."

Young Lord Oddley only moved from the Verity's doorstep to dash to his club and once again to telephone enquiries. His sister attached herself to the household more firmly than she attached the coloured monocle of the day to her eye.

Cynthia insisted upon seeing Margaret. If Margaret was asleep Cynthia could wait. There was something she absolutely must see Margaret about. Important business; yes, business. Margaret knew about it. If Cynthia might have a spot of lunch? Just a whiskey and splash, with a caviare sandwich or anything at all. Presently Margaret was well enough to raise her lean young form, clad in black silk pyjamas piped with orange satin, to

make grimaces at her tonic and to demand a fountain pen, something to write on and her cheque book. . . .

Yes; where was Margaret's cheque book? Yes; it was necessary to write a cheque now. It was urgent. Please don't argue; find her cheque book. Where? Well! Look! Either it was among that pile of lime-green undies in that second drawer— No? Oh, damn! Or it was between the pages of that French book of Cynthia's "A L'ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs," on the dressing table? Not? Then under that heap of furs and the hat box on the top of the wardrobe. Not there? Absurd! Must be somewhere! Why couldn't it be found? Margaret would get up herself in a minute. . . . Very well, then, LOOK. Had anybody taken it down into the drawing-room?

In the drawing-room Uncle Tom asked mildly what the deuce the girl wanted with a cheque book just now.

"She didn't say," replied the mother flurriedly searching. "Ah! Here it is! Slipped into the middle of all those new gramophone records. I'll run with it—"

"Hold on, Violet. Does Margaret lend money to Miss Monocle?"

"Uncle! I never ask what the darling does with her own money."

"Wouldn't surprise me if the darling had to settle all her friend's bills that aren't taken to the fond brother. I'd mislay that cheque book again, if I were you, Violet, my dear."

But Violet Verity had dashed upstairs again to her child's room.

Standing four-square on the hearthrug, Uncle Tom began amplifying to me his first hint dropped at the Berkeley.

“Pity we can’t ship off some of these youngsters to live like savages on a coral reef! Better than any schools. Life in the open air . . . simplify everything . . . use their muscles . . . wholesome food . . . fruit, fish, what they can collar for themselves. . . .

“People turn up their noses at health fads. Bernarr MacFadden, physical culture; call it rot. Seems a more pleasing form of rot than this. . . . Give ’em a chance to grow straight-limbed, clean inside, clear-skinned. Hold themselves right. Look at the shape of life. Get back to roots of things. Pity we can’t pack them off by main force,” mused this fanatic. “If I had my way—but there’s got to be a change of air— Is that the doctor going downstairs now?”

3

The shrewd-eyed doctor had ordered a change of air as soon as Miss Verity could take it. He agreed with Mr. Lloyd’s *idée fixée* that the best thing in the world for her would be a sea voyage.

“I refuse,” snapped the convalescent from the cushions of the drawing-room divan (this was on her first day down). “Even crossing the Channel nearly does me in every time. Even by aëroplane I arrive a corpse. Don’t I, Vi?”

“Indeed, Uncle, the darling is always most terribly seasick.”

"So was Nelson. Few days' seasickness hurts nobody. Does 'em good, Margaret."

Margaret limp, pasty-faced, swathed in Shetland wool shawls and yellow silk kimono padded like the advertisement for Michelin tyres, rolled dull eyes up to the black ceiling. "I nearly expire at the very first sniff of the engines on one of those disgusting, filthy little boats."

"Why pick a dirty boat? Travel *en luxe*, my dear. Matter of fact, I've a scheme about that," propounded Uncle Tom, setting his square bulk in a firmer stance upon the hearthrug. "I know the boat you ought to take. Most enjoyable trip round to Madeira you could have in her. The very boat."

Margaret dropped her lids as though already she felt that vessel's motion.

"Ah, she is a peach," enlarged Uncle Tom, his boyish eyes twinkling down from under his snowed-upon hair. "The 'Sweetheart II' is her name. Comfortable as a first-class hotel. Everything up to the minute. Pretty as a picture too. I know he'd lend me that boat for a cruise—yes; by the way, she is my young friend Mount's steam yacht."

Margaret, without troubling to open her eyes, vouchsafed: "I don't like your Mr. Mount."

"Oh, darling! When he has been so particularly nice about us. Not every young man would have taken it as he did! I mean about strangers coming into his brother's fortune. It would have been his, remember."

"He's wallowing in pots of it."

"It doesn't always follow. The people with most

always seem to want more, Margaret. He's so different to that. And he is so nice looking—"

"Who bothers about what men are like to look at?" drawled Margaret. "He's got horrid manners, I consider."

"You needn't be troubled with them," twinkled Uncle Tom. "Archie Mount needn't necessarily come to sea with us."

"I don't go to sea with anybody. Dover to Calais is the farthest sea trip I mean to take ever," snapped Jack Verity's daughter. "Let everybody understand that!"

Here an apprehensive glance from Mrs. Verity at Uncle Tom.

Unperturbed, he said: "No longer voyage? Still, you've got to have a change. Not much of that in foggy old London."

"Well, then, Paris," elected Margaret, languidly casting onto the leopard-skin rug another cigarette end. "Wire to the Meurice for the suite I like."

"Might as well wire to the Carlton here. Not much difference between our climate and theirs at this time of year," objected Uncle Tom. "If you won't go on the sea, Margaret, go near it. What about the Côte d'Azur?"

"More like it," conceded Margaret. "If I must move anywhere let's go to the South of France. That's an idea. Monte amuses Cynthia. She likes Nice. Cynthia's planned to be there at the end of December before they go on to Cairo. Righto, Vi. The South of France. We'll go on to Egypt later with Cynthia and Odds."

4

Later, Mr. Lloyd asked: "Violet, is your girl going to marry that fool—I mean his young lordship?"

"The darling has refused him five times," reported Mrs. Verity, with two distinct expressions in her gentle face that mirrored two attitudes of mind at war. She could not look upon Claude Oddley as a desirable son-in-law; she was equally unable to keep from preening herself over his courtship of her child.

"Margaret declares that she won't marry anybody at all for years yet."

"The rat-faced—I mean the sister is all for the match. Don't blame her either from her point of view. Convenient enough for her to have the rich young sister-in-law under her thumb. A nasty girl, Miss Oddley."

"Oh, I don't know, Uncle," hesitated Violet (who always had that hatred of unmitigated censure). "I shouldn't call Cynthia that."

"I should. I'd call her and all of her kith and kidney part of the blight that is settling on the modern young. I haven't said much about them since I've been back, but"—watching Violet out of the tail of that eye, he discoursed to me—"frankly, they worry me."

I played up to him. "What, Mr. Lloyd? The manners?"

"No. Those may be a little worse on the top to-day, but I don't care—even for their cheeking their fathers and mothers by their Christian names. Healthy reaction from children who said 'sir' or 'madam' to parents

who used to thrash them into imbecility or cripples! I don't lose any sleep over that. *Let* the youngest in the party seize the deepest chair, mix whiskeys and sodas, grab the telephone without a 'May I?' in other people's houses. Matter of taste. Not the point."

"The point," I had suggested, "is the moral aspect—?"

"No; I give up modern morals. I am like that sensible man, King Charles Second, who 'never meddled with the *souls* of ladies.' Doesn't bother me when unblushing young buds tell me that marriage is a toppling institution, with barely two more generations to go. Perhaps the kids are right. I shan't be here to see. Perhaps it's perfectly true that 'virtue' of yesterday is 'sex complex' of to-day, and may be 'crime' of to-morrow. Half that's talk. Even if it isn't, I let that side of it alone. But, mark you"—Mr. Lloyd's shrewd brown face had set resolutely—"I do worry about their physical health."

Mrs. Verity, from her corner, looked pained.

"Mentality? Well. Say they use their brains for different things. I don't mind their not walking and their not reading—although those were two of my favourite occupations when I was a youngster," said Uncle Tom. "This lot never puts eye to classic or foot to ground. Never mind. Why should they? Their exercise they take in dancing. Why should they walk anywhere when they can get there in a tenth of the time? Why read if they don't want to spoil eyesight over print? Nothing that's ever been written in a book is worth what they can look at with their own eyes. But do they use their eyes? Do they look at the country—or each other—with any enjoyment? Does Margaret? [Not she.] These lads

might be a battalion of negro pages or Spanish dwarfs to fetch and carry for all she knows. I'm not grouching, that's only temporary. But mark you"—here he spoke grimly enough—"I shall grouse if it means a permanent state of limp unfitness. Bodies—that is what I worry about."

"Really, Uncle—" Violet had hesitated. The late-Victorian of her type always said "figure" instead of "body."

Her uncle drove ahead. "Strength and beauty—where ought these to be found? In the young bodies of the growing generation—the bodies that ought to hold the sound mind and the decent nature. That's where we look for the nation's hope. Some of these brats aren't justifying our confidence. What's to be done with them?"

"You can't 'do' anything with modern young," I had suggested. "When you were it, could anybody older do anything with *you*, Mr. Lloyd? They couldn't do a thing with *me* when they tried. So I don't expect anything better now it's my turn to watch the young."

"There's more to watch now, my dear, than in your girlhood."

"M'm?"

"More scope," he had insisted. "It's made easier, quicker for the young to destroy themselves. Night clubs, shows, drinks, luxuries; tearing about on their latest-model, million-Robot-power engines . . . all excellent things—if they learnt how to use 'em. They abuse 'em. They can't learn where to stop."

"Because they are all so young, Margaret's friends," Violet had pleaded. "The oldest isn't twenty-four."

“And, Mr. Lloyd, they can’t be expected to balance things as we can—”

“You mean we are old fogeys? Agreed. Still—” He turned to me. “Now supposing there was a competition for walking, swimming, life enjoying, endurance and energy generally—which of these youngsters at the Ritz that night would you, yourself, refuse to take on?”

I mused. “Perhaps you’re right. Even at my age—yes! Yes. I would take on any girl in Cynthia Oddley’s set.”

“Well, can you imagine Cynthia, Margaret and Co. as fogeys? Can you imagine them—” Freely he parodied:

“What will they make at forty, if the Lord keeps them alive,
When they’ve let themselves go mouldy, before they are
twenty-five?”

“I’ll tell you. They’ll make the fortunes of the nerve specialists and the nursing homes of England in—”

“Oh, come,” I protested, “you can’t take a leisured, pampered minority as typical of the nation’s youth!”

“No. But when my own flesh and blood is to be found deteriorating in that small, luxury class that sets the pace for the others . . . I do worry about my young niece. Violet! (Margaret’s mother looked more than distressed.) Violet, you were a strong, bonny girl; fresh as a daisy; you handed on what you were given—”

“Please, Uncle dear—”

“And your Jack was the finest young fellow who ever went to sea. . . . What sort of grandchildren do you think you are going to get? Little Oddleys?”

Silence in that padded room. What could she say?

“Violet, my dear, that family is finished. There’s every sign of that in its last boy and girl. Finished, dead. Why bolster it up with fresh blood, if you’ll excuse my mixed metaphors? Why marry it? That beastly young woman is working all she knows how to bring that about. Why have her here?”

“It’s Margaret’s house,” sighed Margaret’s mother faintly. “The darling is so loyal, so generous to her friends. It seems to her natural that she should settle dress bills for Cynthia. Yes! I—I couldn’t help seeing the counterfoil. She mislaid her cheque book again just now. Sent it down to the kitchen under a stack of *Vogues*. I did see that eleven hundred pounds had been made out to Miss Cynthia Oddley—”

“What?”

“Too much, isn’t it? I think . . . I must . . . I shall,” decided Mrs. Verity trembling. “I am going to speak to Margaret about that.”

5

That tardy speaking to reduced to tears—not Margaret, but Mrs. Verity.

Whereat in one of her rare fits of impulsive affection the girl flung her arms about her sorely tried parent and rated herself for being a beast to her “angel of a Mums.”

“‘You are so good you make me worse,
Some women are like this, I think.’”

"I was always a rotten daughter. Even at the cottage. You remember, Mums? When I used to say: 'You'll have to love me back into goodness'?"

"Ah, my darling baby. Still the same baby to me if you only didn't get taken from me by your friends, if you would always be like this as you are at the bottom of your heart, instead of—"

Twisting herself away, Margaret hectored again. "You're not going to make me say I'll drop my best pal, though. You absolutely misjudge her. As for Uncle Tom, he can't pretend to begin to understand. Ridiculous that I shouldn't help Cynthia! It wasn't dress bills, as it happens. It was bridge—and of course some of it was mah-jong. I can't explain to you why she couldn't go to Odds, because one can't give one's pals away," Margaret feverishly protested. "Cynthia can't help it if they are so wickedly poor. Yes, wickedly poor compared to me! Odds has just enough to get along with; but he had debts to pay off when he came of age, as you heard from Cynthia. He had to let their old place, their beautiful old place in Devonshire, with the yew tree a thousand years old and the chapel where Lady Cynthia was walled up and her ghost still walks and the bed with Queen Elizabeth's handkerchief left under the bolster! Wasn't it bad enough that the Oddleys had to let that and to pig it in Half Moon Street themselves—"

"To 'pig it,' Margaret? The rent of their Half Moon Street flat is more than your dear father saw for a year's pay."

"You don't understand. People of your generation

can't be expected to cope with our standards, as Cynthia said. Understand, Violet," her daughter's fiat went forth, "if you're not nice to Cynthia, if you won't invite her here or when we are abroad together— Well, there is one thing I might do. There's—"

"What?" murmured Margaret's unhappy mother. The door opened.

"Lord Oddley," announced Benson gloomily.

6

That afternoon Lord Oddley proposed to Margaret for the sixth time.

I can tell you about it, since I was there at the time. So was the girl's mother.

I don't believe it would have made any difference to the girl if Cynthia, Benson, the butler, her Uncle Tom, and the entire bodyguard had also been in the room.

That padded casket of a place was (if possible) more chaotically characteristic of itself than on the afternoon of my first call.

Full up was it of fainting flowers in beribboned baskets (offerings from the bodyguard) of scattered magazines, yellow French books, of littered confectionary, cushions, boxes of forced strawberries, peaches partially eaten, plates dark with grapeskins, the usual top dressing of tobacco refuse, and a half-finished Bovril and brandy. Heavens, how stuffy it was! Behind the glass screen the wood fire blazed half-way up the chimney. When Margaret was upstairs those heavily curtained windows had been allowed to stand open, but now once more they were

carefully shut. In among the landslide of couch cushions little was to be seen of Margaret but the limp, crumpled dull-brown hair, the small pallid face, and the white wrist of one hand.

Claude Oddley, who always kissed Margaret's hand when he came in with the gesture he had learnt from his French tutor, still held her lax fingers.

In Mrs. Verity's girlish "set" for a girl to have her hand held by a young man had still been in the nature of a fascinating impropriety. Margaret gave her hand up to her admirers without any more ado than she gave to one and another of the bodyguard her sable stole to hold or her bunch of jingling golden gadgets to examine. No more than that was it to her that she reclined, under the eyes of her mother and of her mother's friend, with fingers locked into the clasp of a young man who had for two years been making love to her, and who evidently meant to continue that courtship.

There he sat at her feet on his favourite floor cushion of black-and-gold-and-dragon's-blood-red brocade. His legs, crossed under him, were limp as those of the Claude doll now flung in an abandoned pose over the sofa end; his gilt-plumed head was sunk deep into his slight chest. He was not ungraceful, that youth; though in the utter bonelessness of his attitude he looked, I thought, as if he had a stick of warm macaroni where most people keep a spine.

"Odds," drawled his lady love, "when you came in I was going to discuss the state of holy matrimony (though why 'holy' I don't know) with my young mother—"

Immediately Mrs. Verity began to look nervous. Not

to be wondered at if you consider, first, the rosy mist of taboo and "Hush—dear, hush" with which her type surround the distant snow mountains of love and marriage. And secondly, the exploring methods of the modern young when irrupting (as it were with metaphorical mountaineering Alpine stocks and ringing shouts) that taboo.

"Ha! don't let me interrupt the mystic topic. Carry on," returned young Oddley. I noticed (not for the first time) his pleasing voice. Muted yet distinct. Full, as is the tune of a regimental march! of long-dead gallantries, of braveries, of tradition. So, centuries ago, might the Sir Claude Oddley have spoken who was close friends with young Prince Harry. Those modulations had sounded in the word-of-command of Oddleys who had fallen in the Civil War. It takes more than three generations or four to compose the timbre of such a voice, the last family feature of all to degenerate. But such details were lost upon Margaret, even as her admirer appealed (with the jesting manner that hid truth) to her mother. "Mrs. Verity, don't you agree with me that it would be a good move for Peggy to marry young?"

"Darling," mocked Margaret in the manner that robs of sweetness and significance the sweetest, most significant word our language owns. "My poor darling, misguided Odds, I have already broken it to Vi that I shan't dream of getting definitely married until I am at least a mature twenty-seven or more."

"Which will bring me up to twenty-nine. I say," complained Claude Oddley, "that's too long to make a man wait."

A man? An anæmic boy. A suffering boy, however.

Whatever ulterior motives marked his sister's affection for Margaret, Claude's was genuine. I regarded this youth sitting with his back to me so that I saw only that smooth gilt head over a faint blue line of silken shirt collar, that slight back under the indigo-blue jacket padded at the shoulders. What was he? Brutally, a waster, a dilettante of life. Not brains for any profession. Not money enough successfully to play the gilded idler. What was there "to" him at all? A certain amount of inherited breeding, the public school manner, the jargon, the modes of the moment. Anything beyond these? Yes. Honest boyish devotion to that under-vitalized girl.

Certainly it was not Margaret's fault if she could not return Claude's devotion. But a sounder girl would have felt sorry, respectfully sorry, for his sincerity.

But Margaret, who could give not what men call "love," did not appear to feel that love in another should have even gentle treatment.

"You're sure it is you I'm going to marry," she flipped at him. "Full of hope, isn't he, ladies?"

Mrs. Verity flushed up to her slightly grey hair, gave an uncomfortable smile and murmured mechanically about milk or lemon. Behind the vorticist silken tea-cosy she confided to me: "I should rather have died—the darling doesn't care enough to be shy!"

And Claude Oddley? The way in which he took it was to care too much to be shy. As if no one else was there he took the fingers which he held, and lifted them, almost as if he did intend to smooth them against the hollow of his young cheek.

"Can't stop my hoping, Peggy!" he said. "I say, Peggy, I'm hoping that if I keep on long enough you will—"

"Will what?"

"Find yourself one day married to me after all."

"What a copy-cat you are. You got that 'find' from Cynthia. I know you did. Cynthia always says that in love affairs people don't really *do* anything. They merely 'find themselves doing' this and that. Why can't I? I never have."

"Do you want to?" took up Claude eagerly; "do you, Peggy?"

"But of course I do! I want to find myself doing everything that's at all intriguing!"

(Intriguing! The passion that moulds destinies!)

Margaret's big, exaggeratedly made-up eyes gazed speculatively beyond Claude's slight shoulder.

She mused: "I wonder if being in love is as amusing as they say, or whether it is half chat?"

("Amusing!" That which transfigures or devastates the lives of men and women!)

"Try, Peggy, try." The boy flushed as he urged. He straightened that stick of limp macaroni into something that more resembled backbone as he sat up. He caught Margaret's other hand. He did lower his voice (imagining possibly that this would not carry through Mrs. Verity's outburst of small talk to her other guest). But even subdued, the clear-cut syllables carried: "Give me a chance to show you, Peggy, old thing. . . . You might . . . Do."

"Do have some muffin while it is hot," Mrs. Verity was

urging me shakily. I could see that this romantic, ardent, yet reticent soul was feeling more agonizingly shy than she had done since her last term at school.

Quite oblivious of us, the younger generation pursued their dialogue.

"Yes, look here. . . . This has been going on for perfect ages . . . for two years it's been making me feel like death," Claude Oddley declared in the tone that should be heard only by one woman in the world—at least only by one woman at a time! The tone of emotion too rushed, too ardent to find the *mot juste* or indeed any words at all. "You'll never find anybody—"

"Oh, shan't I?"

"You'll never find anybody more infernally in earnest than I am. Ever since I saw you in Switzerland that time. . . . Ghastly dance you've led me. . . . For two mortal years I've had to feel like this about you. . . . There's been nobody else that I have had the faintest use for. Won't you give me a chance? . . . I am so keen . . . I'd make you . . . if you'd only, only—"

To me, as I sat there trying to make talk about all the old schoolfellows of Violet and me who had since been turned into corpses or wives, the muttered love-making seemed horribly pathetic. This boy was in earnest. That energy which fighting ancestors had spent in battle, that intellect which had occupied them with statecraft—all that was left over of those things as an inheritance to this last of their line, Claude Oddley put into first love. The atmosphere of that room simmered with the unmistakable electricity of it. It flamed in him.

"Peggy, Peggy . . . I'm mad about you . . . I'm

hopeless. It thrills me just hearing people talk about you. Can't you let me show you—"

With detached interest the girl asked: "What do you suppose it is that thrills you about me like this? Two years . . . as Cynthia says, it isn't *natural* for a pash to last all that time. It becomes a complex; no, a fixation. It isn't as if you never saw any girls, like people in the days when there were only about one or two in the parish, and when everybody was faithful to the ONE, and all that. You see mobs of wonderful girls—"

"They are not wonderful. They're not you. I haven't the faintest use for anybody who isn't you. Oh, Peggy, you are *you!* . . . different. . . . Nobody else is youish—"

This time he did press her hand to his cheek, to his lips.

Had that been the young Jack Verity, no power on earth could have induced him to give a demonstration such as this of young Lord Oddley!

Had that been Violet Verity in Margaret's place—

Of course one could not imagine her there, any more than she herself could understand the type of lovers who allow quite passionate kisses to the tune of

"And if the others see, what matter then?"

Then she would have found incredible. She did not even know that it meant that she herself was just far from cold-blooded. Caresses, to her, meant something much too disturbing. Even the least caress, even the caress by voice, she could not have endured in the presence of a third person.

Yet her girl Margaret—there she lounged! Mildly interested. Faintly flattered! Undisturbed by the nearness of obviously roused young love.

Men find it hard to believe in what utter torpor the senses of a girl can sleep. So often ignorance takes on the form of coquettishness, of deliberate trifling, even of zestful cruelty!

In Margaret, ill-health, overstrain, and ungirlish “nerves” had so postponed the awakening that she could maltreat her adorer just as a child of two will pull to pieces some wretched insect. I thought . . .

Suddenly I was startled into dropping my teaspoon.

“Oh! you darling,” Margaret had exclaimed, quite animated at last. “Oh, you sweet thing!”

Only for an instant were we allowed to imagine that she might be addressing the young man. “He heard you say ‘you’! Thought you were talking to Yu-Yu,” drawled Margaret. “Look at the pet. He’s the nicest present Eric has ever given me.”

The “pet” here thrust a head like an animated chrysanthemum from between two cushions. The pet, Margaret’s Pekinese, dragged out from the coverings its body of a tiny heraldic lion, shook its ringleted ears, goggled about with eyes of bulging, glossy black, and emitted an arpeggio of snorts.

“My precious,” coaxed Margaret in a tone that reminded me of Violet Verity’s own voice cooing over her baby’s little, tea-cosy-shaped pillow. “My precious! *did* he think they were talking to Yu-Yu, then?”

With another arpeggio of snuffles Yu-Yu thrust out his

wet, geranium petal of a tongue towards the face of his young mistress.

“Ah, Peggy! No, no, dash it all! Don’t!” cried out Claude Oddley, sharply. “Put him down. Put the little brute down. Little beast!”

“‘Brute’?” protested Margaret reproachfully over the pet dog’s head and dangling ears. “Go for him, Yu-Yu. Did he say you were a beast? Bite him! Bite him hard.”

“Wouff,” exclaimed Yu-Yu’s tiny voice.

His mistress put him tenderly aside upon the cushions. She felt for her chain and the jingling gadgets. Taking up the gold-framed miniature mirror, the jade-and-nacr  lipstick, she proceeded to apply what her friend the Prince’s double had described as “red wax” to those petulant flower curves of her mouth.

Even as she wielded the toys, Claude Oddley sought her hands again.

“Peggy!”

He knelt up by the divan. Huskily he persisted:

“Must you keep putting me through it like this? Must you? Couldn’t you ‘find yourself’ being sweet to me? Getting engaged to me before you are twenty-seven? I say, can’t you try and realize. . . . *What* about now? Good sort of date. . . . *What* about now?”

“I must get a handkerchief,” exclaimed Mrs. Verity, rising in agitation. “Have you seen the—the—the new black glass set in my bedroom?”

“Vi, where are you going?” demanded her daughter, flinging her head back onto the sofa end and, thus upside down, gazing after our retreating figures. “Are you

going? How pricelessly Victorian. Running away because of us? For heaven's sake go on with your tea. Yes; and can't I have a small drink mixed? Don't rush coyly from the room merely because Claude happens to be proposing. A habit of his; he honestly doesn't know when he is doing it."

"It's you who don't know what you are doing. Look here, you might at least answer me. You might at least tell a fellow if you think you could ever . . . can't you?"

To that touchingly hoarse appeal, that languid drawl responded only: "How can any one start feeling intrigued before they have had a single cocktail and when they are only that minute over feeling like death warmed up with 'flu'? How can I know what I really want to do?"

"When will you know? When will you tell me?"

"What a worry you are, Odds. Later on."

"Will you think it over to-night, and let me have a word in the morning?"

"My dear thing, *any* 'word in the morning' is always 'No.' Besides, I can't think of anything just at present, except what I have got to have packed to take abroad—"

"Will you tell me in Nice?"

"Oh; that's what? A fortnight ahead. If you remind me perhaps I'll tell you in Nice." She tilted her head round again. "Righto, Violet, you needn't be afraid of sitting out the rest of this affecting scene. I'm not going to accept, Claude, this minute!"

As I gathered, the words conveyed to her mother exactly what they were meant to convey; namely: "If you tried to bar Cynthia I might 'find myself' marrying Claude. Then Cynthia, whom you disapprove of, could

be with me as much as I chose. She'd be my sister-in-law. We should have to see that she was all right for money. Nobody would be able to stop it."

And, personally, I shared her mother's sudden, chilling fear that Margaret presently (and for various reasons, for any reason but the One!) would "find herself" drifting into marrying this enslaved boy.

Aloud she added to him: "Well, that's that; isn't it? You won't worry me about this again for another fortnight. And then, perhaps, I will let you know what I have made up my mind to do when we are all in France."

7

For the plan remained that in a couple of weeks the Oddleys should come on to the Veritys at Nice.

Then, later, the Veritys could go on with Cynthia and Claude to Cairo.

"Ah?" commented Uncle Tom presently, in tones fraught with many things he might think but could not say. His buccaneering eyes twinkled as if over schemes that were, even now, maturing. "*That's* their programme, is it?"

CHAPTER VI

COCKTAILS ON THE YACHT

1

“**A**ND Miss Verity? May I mix a cocktail for you?”
“You may,” challenged Margaret. “I’d love one. I don’t care if it is against orders.”

This was on Mr. Mount’s yacht as she lay in Nice harbour, a fortnight later. It was at his party on that sunshiny late December afternoon—destined to revolutionize the course of Margaret’s life.

2

In what a different setting did we find ourselves? Darkly frowning London was worlds away. Difficult to believe that over there in Hill Street rain rained, fog fogged and people splashed about with umbrellas, damp furs, muddy shoes, red noses and cries of “Brrr! What vile weather for Christmas!”

Escape to the Southern coast meant the usual transformation scene from murkiness to brilliance.

All was brilliant. Sapphire skies, stabbed by snowy distant jigsaw of Alps. Greeny-grey ripple of olive groves. Orange trees loaded with golden fruit as a Christmas tree is set with coloured balls. Gay artificial-

ity of white towns along the Mediterranean's edge! Cliff-high hotels, like siren's rocks, vocal with dance music! Crescents of alluring shop windows! Vivid turf of parks and squares, bordered with plummy palms! Flower gardens, already bright with scarlet salvias, white bachelor's buttons, geranium, marigold, carnation! Torrents of Bougainvillæa showered like wine spilled out over the vases and gateways of toyish pleasure houses. Here across the steep leafy uplands the Corniche road drew its dazzling Z; between the blue Riviera sky, where gulls planed and swooped, and the bay, blue-shot with green, whereon rocked countless little French fishing-boats. Whereon, too, gleamed white and graceful as a sleeping swan that steam yacht of Mr. Mount's.

Here again I apologize (as I apologized apropos of Mr. Lloyd's profession) for my own vagueness. Such yawning gaps are there in my knowledge of men and the things that have to do with men! Never was woman more hopelessly at sea when—well, at sea! Never was any one more incredibly ignorant of nautical terms and the working of ships, boats, the compass, the tides . . . Which is unfortunate for this particular part of the story. Do not imagine that I did not appreciate it all; the freshness of the sea breeze, the indescribable feeling of freedom as of a gull that swoops above groves of graceful masts, the cool scent of the sea, the beckoning horizon, the clear jade depth beneath the ship's side, the looping reflections in the still harbour water, the mysteries of knots, rigging, and all the activities of those blue-jerseyed, sun-browned, wholesome-faced sailors. These I enjoyed without understanding and without the power to convey. . . .

My friend, Mrs. Verity that sailor's wife!—would have been far less hopeless than I at conveying, as she should have been conveyed, that beautiful boat, queening it among the rest of the shipping in the lovely harbour. Mrs. Verity, on this important afternoon, was not present. She had of course been invited to the bachelor tea-party. She had, however, pleaded fatigue after having stayed up so late at the Casino the night before.

Abroad, even more so than in London, Margaret's life was lived by electric light. Not for Margaret did the Riviera offer its sunshiny out of doors, its mountain walks to high-set snowy villages, its wild gay picture of landscape and crimson sunset patterned by black parasol pines, its tideless, milk-warm bays tempting the swimmer all the winter through. Except to splash in the hottest days at Deauville, Margaret had not swum for years. Sea bathing "took it out of her." For game she "couldn't get up the energy." Over here in a playground crowded by ardent players who bristle with golf clubs and who, at aperitif time, are to be found sitting happily at lunch with fur coats pulled on over tennis things, Margaret never attempted a round of golf. She seldom bothered even to look on at the tennis.

The Rolls which she had brought over was always closed. Between the door of that car and the whirling glass-sectioned entrance to her hotel, a casino, or one of her favourite shops—this was all the fresh air that Margaret had found it necessary to breathe until we had stepped into the little boat wherein we were rowed across to young Mr. Mount's yacht.

Our host showed us all over her; showed us—

Ah, well—

Here is where I have to leave blanks, to be filled in by those who are, as children say, “good at” the subject. Personally I am so “bad at” it that were I to attempt to describe to you the beauties of the “Sweetheart II,” nothing would become apparent but the nakedness of the land. Namely, my ignorance. Yet I could appreciate the exquisite shapeliness of that vessel’s lines and her exquisite cleanness. What struck me most, perhaps, was the dazzle of brasswork, the honeycomb order of everything, the smooth ivory of decks, the paint fresh as a petal.

“As far as the beauty of the home is concerned,” I told young Mount, “I cannot imagine who originated the idea that woman’s place was the home. No mistress of a house keeps it as you keep this boat. No female staff exists who would have things shining as your men have them. I can imagine that men who live on yachts and launches and houseboats would soon forget there were any women in the world. They would learn so well to do without them.”

“You think so?” said Mr. Mount.

That pleasant, candid voice of his had the gift of keeping from one instead of expressing what he really thought himself.

Remembering that the young man was going to be married, I feared I had been tactless in presupposing that he could forget there were women in the world. His fiancée, Mrs. Verity had reported, was in Rome staying with her own people for three months before her wedding. Hence Mr. Mount’s last bachelor cruise in the beautiful “Sweetheart II.”

3

Margaret, nonchalantly, approved of that yacht.

"I don't so much mind being on any boat as long as she doesn't move."

"She won't move just yet, Miss Verity," said our host.

Margaret might have shown more interest had it been anybody else's yacht. From the first she nourished a conviction that young Mount needed snubbing. By some wordless code she had "got" that Mr. Mount remained completely undazzled and that in no circumstances, engagement or no engagement, could he be counted upon to join Miss Verity's bodyguard. Miss Verity had at that time all the possessive, acquisitive vanity of the girl who sees men as scalps and slaves. So she was languid. She made it a favour that she had set her high-heeled foot (shod by a mere grille of slender white strap) upon his yacht. A favour that she condescended to loll on the cushioned seat of his deck house. A favour to leave the scarlet crescent impression of her lip salve on the rim of one of his teacups; a favour to drive one of his tiny, silver forks into a cream cake looking like one of those clouds upon which gamble the upside down Cupids of a fragonard ceiling decoration.

"Wallace scoured every pâtisserie in Nice to find cakes that he thought the young lady would like," said Mr. Mount, turning that pretty smile upon her.

Lackadaisically, Margaret asked: "Who is Wallace?"

"My steward now. He used to be Charles'—my brother's batman. His nurse. Everything in fact."

"Ah. He was in the train that morning. I believe

I remember some one," drawled Margaret. She put down the fork, leaving three-quarters of the fragonard cloud Choux à la crème on her plate. Bored with tea and party, she lolled back against the cushion, refused one of his cigarettes and drew out one of her own rose-tipped and perfumed ones.

Without seeming to look at her, I took her in as she was on that afternoon; well knowing (as I confess I did) that it would be long, very long before I saw Margaret Verity again, and that it was conceivably possible I might never again see her looking exactly as she looked then.

There she lolled, next to her Uncle Tom; that sturdy, sun-burnt, lichen-haired, and twinklingly observant pirate. Opposite to her Mr. Mount's clever and charming face was conventionalized into an expression so entirely neutral that he might have been glancing into a glass case of mounted and labelled specimens of tropic birds.

Margaret was all in white of a very Continental cut. She had a belted white silk knitted frock with the then fashionable pocket-flap over what was presumably her left breast. This was embroidered with a curly monogram—"M. V." About the skirt of the frock a frieze of racing monkeys was also embroidered by hand. She had pulled on, over this, a heavier loose coat of white jersey lined with something ultra-decorative by Poiret and having an immense collar and cuffs of white monkey fur. Her hat was a white corolla to her small, ailing face, tinted, as usual, over pallor and—yes, for the last time let us mention spots. The smart hat was dragged down to those big, grey, wide-apart eyes, from which the heavily masticked lashes had robbed all softness, and much

youth. In spite of all she did look very young, she did look very pretty, very wistful and wan; a drooping white rose, a clouding pearl. Do not forget, as details to this picture, the girl's pearl string, her diamond arrow, her platinum wrist-watch, and that inevitable gold chain swinging her gadgets of cigarette holder, jade god, lucky pig, horseshoe, mirror, lipstick, powder container, eyelash pencil and baby phial of perfume.

Now, one unsophisticated touch about Margaret was that her perfumes so frequently varied. The finished woman of the world (that she imagined herself) hits upon her own *mélange* and is faithful to that characteristic scent. But Margaret, one week, would use nothing but "Royal Fern." Again, she would have a fancy for Cynthia's essence of "Le Moment Après." Next she would drench herself with "Toute la Forêt." Then, putting them on together, she would add "Nuit de Chine." She always put on far too much; too indiscriminately. It became oppressive. It filled that sealed deck house where we sat.

"Do you find it a little bit close in here?" suggested Mr. Mount patiently, at last. "Would you like me to open a—"

"Oh, please don't open anything," protested Margaret drawing up that fur collar. "How is it that as soon as wherever one is sitting gets cosy and warm somebody is certain to insist upon being heavily Spartan, hurling open windows, and letting in hurricanes of cold air? And just at sundown, when it turns so icy over here! Usually, it's my mother who starts that. Now it's you."

Her manner of pronouncing that "you" underlined her distaste for young Mr. Mount.

He said, good humoredly resigned: "Oh, all right, Miss Verity. No air, by request. May I give you some more tea?"

"No, thanks." Margaret's four-inch-high heel kicked against a certain large square dressmaker's box of orange cardboard patterned with black butterflies, which lay on the rug at my feet.

"More clothes for our Miss Margaret," commented her Uncle Tom, cocking his eye upon this package, which, by the way, was not without its importance. "Well, it's what one expects from you ladies. You bring over six huge innovation trunks so crammed with finery that it takes a crew of porters to move them. Then you haven't got a stitch to wear and have to buy all new."

"Those aren't mine, Uncle Tom," Margaret told him. "Those are hers." (A nod at me. I had been shopping with her.) "Of course one will have to get stacks of other dresses for Cairo," Margaret said, "but I am waiting for Cynthia before I go into that seriously. I promised Cynthia I wouldn't choose a rag without her."

"When do you expect that pal of yours?"

"To-morrow."

"Oh."

"Yes, she's arriving to-morrow by the Blue Train. There wasn't room after all at our hotel for her and Odds, but I have booked rooms for them at the Negresco. It will be fun when they come," added Margaret, on a note of animation. "Eric said he might get away with them, and we can do everything together and it will be much more cheery—"

"Well, you ladies, what about making a move soon?" put in her Uncle Tom with a flicking, lizard-tail glance

at me. "Going on to the Casino as usual to-night, Margaret?"

"No, I have ordered the Rolls and we are driving over to the rooms at Monte after dinner. I want to try that new system of Cynthia's again; just to give it another chance before I see her. I'm only seven thousand francs down now. Besides, before I dress and dine I want to go round to my little hat woman; she must keep a couple of hats I want Cynthia to see—"

"Mr. Lloyd, you'll let me give you a small drink before you go ashore?" suggested young Mount, rising lightly to his feet. In the restricted space there showed more noticeably the contrast between his large make and the dainty lightness of his movements. Never was a man who managed so well a sizable body. He had, too, a feature so much prized in and by women; namely, remarkably well-turned and slender ankles. *Des attachés fines*, say the French. I noticed the nice "set" of his throat, and of his wrist as he put out a hand to the bell.

Enter in his white steward's jacket the thick-booted, ineradicably military Wallace, bearing a large silver tray loaded with everything appropriate to the making of cocktails—ever a weakness of Margaret.

4

Other times, other drinks—

Margaret's mother, always a thirsty girl, had enjoyed what used to be called, voluptuously, a "nice" cup of tea. Boiling water poured on a generous supply infused the

fragrant amber; at the bottom of the big-footed breakfast cup two massive squares of sugar were first dropped in; add an inch of fragrantly creamy milk, then tea; then the lacing of real cream. People have skulked into opium dens of Chinatown, have destroyed themselves on heroin and cocaine without experiencing the pleasure that Violet got from her cup of tea.

From milk, too. Frothing, foaming, drunk warm and still sweet from the side of the tilted milking can in the field, it left its white crescent to be wiped from the upper lip. From iced lemonade; greeny-yellow as rock crystal. What nectar after a hard set, after haymaking! How insipid would any of these potions have seemed to Violet's girl who was now remarking in a drawl that found it almost too much trouble to pass her reddened lips:

"I hear they mix the most wonderful Martini at Aden. . . ."

5

Busy with chipped ice, lemons, mysterious coloured bottles and shaker, our host uttered his gentle voiced "And Miss Verity? May I mix a cocktail for you?"

"You may. I'd love one," Margaret answered with that defiant glance at her uncle. She knew that he knew the doctor's veto against these frequent pick-me-ups. "I don't care if it is against orders."

"One 'Bronx'," stipulated her Uncle Tom. "No more, my dear." Young Mount silhouetted large and dark against white paint, mauve evening sky, masts of ship-ping outside, handed her the glass.

"If you like lemonade," said Uncle Tom to whom I had confided this Sunday-school taste, "you ought to sample a deadly concoction they mix of old brandy and orange. You'd never think, to taste it, that it was anything but the most innocuous soft drink that ever happened. I won't say anything about the effect."

"Do let me try it," put in Margaret. "Mock lemon? How attractive. I must have one. No, I tell you what I'd like (she had finished her "Bronx"). I'd like a 'rain-bow.' I've never tried it. Fascinating to look at. Cynthia can mix them. She takes seven different liqueurs. Like the seven deadly sins, don't you know. Quite Basil Dean. In coloured layers. Seven of them. All up a long glass. Let me try to mix one myself, Mr. Mount?"

For once in her young life absolutely no attention was paid to Margaret by the man whom she happened to address.

Mr. Mount had turned to the other man; was talking to him absorbedly.

Something to do with the yacht. A stretch of that engine talk or sea talk which is Greek to me.

I had my own preoccupation.

I was deeply worried. Yes, in suspense and almost at my wit's end. For we had come now to the most difficult part of our arrangements for that afternoon.

I was due to leave the yacht.

6

To leave.

Unostentatiously, to fold my tent like the Arabs and silently steal away—those had been my orders.

How to carry them out?

There I was clustered with three other people in that deck house of a two-hundred-ton yacht lying off Nice. The late afternoon was slipping on its wrap of mauve twilight jewelled with lamps. And anyhow, wouldn't the girl see? She had eyes. She was quick enough.

How truly manlike to sketch out this scheme so daring and bold in outline and to leave the woman of the party to fill in the details. All details seemed inevitable giveaways.

Something had been murmured to me about leaving young Margaret at the tea-table when I was taken to look at—whatever object mysterious and nautical there might be. All very well. But how manage it? It's at moments like these that the person one wishes to leave develops a limpet-like quality. How could I get away from the girl? Several suspenseful moments went by.

Feverishly I waited for the least opening to give Margaret the slip.

Then Margaret played into my hands.

While the men talked, while I glanced from them to the deck-house entrance, Margaret had been struck by a thought. While I finally desperately, with I know not what excuse of wanting to speak to Wallace, slipped out to join that fellow conspirator, Margaret turned to that phalanx of coloured bottles.

Snubbed by Mr. Mount? Not the smallest notice taken of her expressed wish about that "rainbow" cocktail?

Very well. Oh, very well. Here she would try mixing it herself.

Quickly, angrily she took up the glass, she took up the

first of those bottles. She slid the jewel-bright liquid carefully, carefully, as described by Cynthia, along the side of the glass. She turned to the next bottle. Like an inexperienced young bee fumbling amidst various coloured flowers, Margaret hovered among those drinks.

What wild mistake could she have made in the proportion of these? Goodness knows. Goodness only knows what witch's broth she in her ignorance contrived to brew. That "rainbow" would not come properly striped. Pearly white, that liquid in her glass was not clear, but of a cloudy opalescence as when morning mist blurs the Channel skyline. It smelt like the best French coffee mingling with white violets. Like coffee it tasted; coffee and sweet sherry with a kick.

"Very good," thought Margaret, as she sipped, intending to drain the glass before we others returned.

She drained it.

Swiftly there crept over her a peculiar sensation. Only once before she had felt it thus . . . helpless . . . suspended in mid-air. Outside a body which was hers, but which was no longer directed by her own will. That one other occasion had been at the dentist's when she had been given some anæsthetic. She had put up her hand to show that she was still conscious. That is, she tried to put it out. Her lax hand had dropped into her lap and she had known no more.

Now on the yacht it happened again. Suddenly she felt past everything except letting her lax hand drop empty glass and all into her silken lap—letting her smartly hatted head droop back against the cushions.

Of what came after that, Margaret knew nothing.

She never guessed of my hasty descent into the shore boat (when I felt like all the fugitive criminals there ever were). Margaret was not conscious of the throbbing, purring pulse with which the "Sweetheart II" engines came to life. The dip of the boat, sudden crowding up towards her of the eager waters, falling back of the coast and its endless chain of gleaming lights upon the dark neck of the Riviera—the shifting, on that distant coast, of landmarks that, like stage scenery, stacked themselves up one in front of the other, that dwindled, that dipped at last below the horizon—lost—all lost upon Margaret. She never saw those last gleaming arrows that the guardian lights sent out over the water, which rose and fell more steeply under a freshening breeze. She didn't see the livid pathway of wake behind her or the pointed reflection of stars in the heaving smooth slopes of waves around.

At last she woke to stare aghast at a shaded lamp that rose, dipped out of sight, then rose again and dipped once more.

Where? Where was she?

Under blankets in a bunk. Still on board ship?

Worse; in every fibre of her being moved that consciousness of swinging, pulsating rhythm which means that a ship is now well out at sea.

PART TWO—THE CURE



CHAPTER I

STORMS AT SEA

I

IN that minute "coming-round," the world as she knew it fell away from Margaret. She was at the beginning of a fresh life.

This she did not know yet. Still staring in bewilderment, she listened. . . .

"Ker-*swish*" sang the seas outside, in that lullaby which brings horror or rapture to the voyager according to whether he be a good sailor or bad one. (You remember how Margaret had been made ill as a child even by voyaging on a camel at the Zoo?) "Ker-*swish*!—WOP."

Wildly, the girl stared at that curtseying lamp, those swaying curtains, the shifting angles of cabin appointments.

"Oh," she gasped aloud.

There appeared, almost as if wedged in the cabin doorway, a four-square figure, a mat of snowy hair over a brown, benignant enquiring face.

"Well, Margaret; had a good sleep?"

"Uncle Tom, what's happened? Where am I?"

"Where? On the 'Sweetheart II,' my dear."

Springing up from her bunk she put down her white-silk-stockinged feet from which her high-heeled shoes had disappeared. ("Swish. . . . Kerswish. . . . WOP.")

Realizing that the cabin floor first rose up to meet, and then abruptly dropped away from her, Margaret reeled.

“What on earth has happened? The yacht’s moving!”

“She certainly is.” (Here the side of the boat quivered to a watery sounding wallop.) “You’ve had a good long nap, Margaret. How far do you suppose we are out from land?”

“From land?” Another steep tilt flung her against the bunk side. She clutched it. “Why—”

“I’d better break it to you now, Margaret, that you may consider yourself off for a two months’ cruise. A sea voyage is what you were ordered, you know,” her Uncle Tom reminded her. “You’ll get to like it all right after you have found your sea-legs—”

Imagine the look on the girlish face under her rumpled brown hair! Her smart French hat swung this way and that on a hook at the other side of the cabin, together with her white, fur-fringed coat. There Margaret swayed, clutching that mahogany ledge, a tall, lean, young figure of consternation.

Off on a cruise? She?

She, to whom anything to do with being on board ship was a nightmare? Smell of it, ceaseless rhythmic pulse of engines, tilt of timbers, semi-opaque green that alternately shrouds the porthole and falls away from a disc of grey—dreadful! The sense of swinging loose—the indescribable “lost” feeling given by that lift and sway, the knowledge that here is no solid Mother Earth to support one, nothing, nothing but the thin barrier of metal and wood between the voyager and the unresting abyss

of the alien element—all this (to some of us a delight) had always seemed to Margaret too bad to be true.

And here she was, carried off into the swinging middle of the horror!

“But it’s absurd. Ridiculous! It’s a joke! Anyhow—” To reassure herself, she raised her voice: “Anyhow, it has gone far enough now. So have we. Take me back. You must take me back. Turn back to Nice at once— Don’t you hear, Uncle Tom? You must stop the ship!”

Here the “Sweetheart II” quivered to the greeting of another wave.

Very dizzy, Margaret felt inside her head a miniature engine begin to pulse. (Result of that deadly, mistakenly mixed cocktail.) Frantically grasping the side of the bunk, she put her other hand up to her forehead. Almost speechless with rage she felt as the situation began to clear.

Swept off to sea? Swept off without a word by this old autocrat who took everything for granted? This, to a young woman who for seven years had been mistress of her own destiny?

“But—but—” Words failed the girl who at barely nineteen had her own income, establishment, staff, cheque book; her own mother a slave, subservient to her plans. “This is an impossible thing to do—”

“If it is done, it is hardly impossible?”

“But how dare you? It wasn’t even your own boat—”

“That’s all right; lent to me by my young friend Mount.”

“Mr. Mount? That odious man. That odious, odi-

ous man,” shrilled Margaret. “I always did hate him. So did Cynthia. All the things she said about him . . . perfectly true. Not only that he was ineradically middle-class, but . . . oh, how right she was! He lent you the yacht? To let you behave like a common felon? *Oh!*—I’ll have you all *arrested*—”

“In mid-ocean?”

“Wireless!” gasped his niece wildly. “Wireless, or something. Did you think I shouldn’t be missed if you carried me off? They’ll send to look for me—”

“And who are ‘they’?”

“Everybody,” gulped Margaret, swaying like some frail garment on a clothesline tossed by the breeze. Could she have said who “everybody” was? Confused pictures rose of the bodyguard, Claude . . . “They’ll all see that horrible yacht has gone from the harbour . . . Our Embassy . . .”

Suddenly she stopped storming. Her face had taken on that unmistakable greenish pallor as of a guelder rose.

“Better lie down again now,” suggested her uncle, standing with sturdy legs braced apart, eyes kindly, but firmly, upon her own.

“You dared . . . you’ll be sorry . . . infamous behaviour . . . criminal!” cried Margaret, again wildly staring round that well-appointed cabin, clean and glossy as the inside of a new, water-colour paint box. Already ivory-smooth paint, chestnut-shiny wood, mirror, carpet, curtains, shut-up washstand, and bright metal “bits” swirled in circular stripes like the rings of red, blue, white, green on a swiftly spinning top. Through that giddy,

circular movement drove the tilt, the strong gay swing of the ship through the water. All around grew up stronger and stronger the sense, the smell, the whole dreaded atmosphere of life on the ocean wave.

Feeling exceedingly ill (though nothing to what she was going to feel), she collapsed again upon the bunk from which she had sprung. She heard herself shriek savage, incoherent scraps of sentences: "Never forgive . . . You'll pay for this . . . Absolutely illegal! Even if I am under twenty-one . . . Odds will take it up to the House of Lords . . . You'll see—"

But here seasickness gripped her in earnest; she was incapable of any but one more word. As she sank into that nightmare of nausea she hurled at her uncle the accusation:

"Kidnapping!"

2

This word that old, bold mate of Henry Morgan ruled out from the first. Long afterwards when questioned about the "adventure," he would protest.

"Kidnapping! What ideas ladies get into their heads. What a way to put it."

One notices in men their real distaste for what we should consider the honestest speech of women. Here was an intelligent, kindly, resourceful man quite ready to sweep away all scruples in a good cause. Willing to commit a benevolent crime. But not prepared to call it kidnapping. Call it interfering for the girl's own good. Call

it taking the part of her natural guardian since her father was dead, her mother was wax in her hands, and since she had never had a firm elder brother. But kidnapping?

Perish the word.

(What a sex!)

As for the other man involved—the lender of the yacht—the young friend, Mount.

His explanation was that something which occurred some years ago in South America had made it quite impossible for him to refuse the favour which Mr. Lloyd had asked of him when we all came over to the South of France. He, Mr. Mount, was so very deeply indebted to Mr. Lloyd for some service which the old gentleman had done him.

What it was he did not divulge. Might be anything from hushed-up murder to coveted introduction. Somehow I feel that the elder man did intervene to save the younger in some serious difficulty . . . how can one tell, with men?

“I was only too glad, you see, to let him have the ‘Sweetheart II’ for a couple of months or so. I didn’t ask any questions about why he wanted her particularly.”

“Because you knew, Mr. Mount! Because you knew exactly what was going to happen.”

“Not exactly. Oh, no; you can’t say that.”

“Roughly you knew. You provided your yacht, your crew, your Wallace to help that old man in his kidnapping scheme—”

“Not at all,” deprecated Mr. Mount. “You’ve got it all wrong. How badly I’ve explained matters!”

(What a sex!)

3

To return to the wretched Margaret.

She afterwards declared that no human soul could be expected to tell how many days they were at sea, when they were thoroughly, unromantically, violently seasick every moment that they were not sunk in feverish slumbers broken by that "swish, wop! stagger" that went on, on.

Into that ghastly cabin stole spells of daylight. She knew also spells when the lights were on.

Then there were the pitch-black spells. She could not count how many of each there were when everything in her world was ceaselessly tilting first one way, then the other. All the time her cabin seemed to rise, rise, rise like a Handley-Page rising into the air, to leave half of Margaret atop of some watery Alp and then abruptly to sink ("WOP!") with the other half Margaret to the uttermost depths of some fathomless ravine.

Day after day, night after night, this went on and on. . . .

Or so she thought, when she was able to think anything at all. Rage left her. Resentment left her. Everything left her. She was just too ill to feel anything but ill.

She didn't know which were meals which she faintly refused, and which were odd snacks of biscuits and champagne to keep herself going.

She didn't know when it was her uncle who tapped at her prison door and came in to give her a look and an unheeded word of cheer, and when it was the devoted and handy Wallace.

Time went . . . In spasms she felt she was getting on towards thirty, forty, fifty years of age. . .

Once, catching sight of brown hair tossed across her face and dangling down over the rug, she wondered why it had not turned grey?

Lying helpless in that bunk, growing more feeble with every whop and flop, feeling as Claude might have said, like death warmed up, she could not think in terms of nights and days.

There seemed to have been time to get to Tahiti and back, when—

Came the night of the storm.

4

With a start Margaret woke.

That pulse of the engines had suddenly stopped. The steady throb had gone on and on until the miserable, sea-sick girl had ceased to hear it, and how it had stopped dead. But the yacht, rocking more violently than ever, was being tossed by a toy on those Alpine waves. And suddenly the cabin was invaded by gruff unknown voices, and somehow it was imparted to the dazed and weakened passenger the news that she must get up on deck.

Did she catch the word “weak”? Was it her imagination that they told her that the “Sweetheart II” was sinking fast? She thought (if you can use the word thought for a film of chaotic impressions now to be reeled off through her mind): “Thank goodness! I shall be drowned in five minutes. It won’t take longer.”

Hands crowded rough wraps upon her . . . hands gripped her upper arm, hustled her up the companionway.

On deck she found herself in a hullabaloo of shrieking winds, of scudding indigo sky, of blackness, roughness and an all-possessing sense of storm—pierced by a sudden thought that simmered up from some long-forgotten bedrock of her being.

“I am a sailor’s daughter! . . . Behave well in danger. . . . Whatever happens . . . keep cool . . . because I am a sailor’s daughter.”

Another thought seemed blown away by the gale that dashed spray into her eyes and face. The shouting out of orders she heard as if at a great distance. Then close to her ear her uncle’s voice: “Put your arms round my neck.” Obediently she put out her arms, felt herself encircled, picked up, carried—where?

5

Now a little light-headed she lay, with something rock-like firm under her nape, something rough and warm all over her. Endlessly she ascended and descended those heaving Alps; now immeasurably steep. Once with an effort she got her eyes open and stared straight up.

Nothing to be seen but the black range of waves rising and falling against an indigo rolling waste of cloud; a rift here and there of ice-black sky was jewelled with points of a dancing star. She shut her eyes; from climbing and descending, climbing and descending she sank again into a stretch of unconsciousness. Then half awake

she started with the thought: "We are shipwrecked . . . boats . . . men rowing . . . going to be drowned. Swim for dear life."

Involuntarily, mechanically, she tried to fumble for the fastening of her skirt, but could not disentangle her hands from the folds of whatever rough covering it was that had been tucked about her so that all but her little wet face remained perfectly warm.

Like a kitten that seeks its mother her hand moved about. Then quite suddenly came the slipping of that other hand into hers and the clasp—not hard, but firm, warm and of an exceeding comfort that held her fingers.

She thought that she was in a dream, she thought now that she knew where she was.

"In our own drawing-room at Hill Street. The divan how springy. 'Flu' . . . down for the first time to-day. . . . Too much trouble to open my eyes. . . . Go on dozing."

Drowsing, numbed yet warm, she was pervaded by the sleepy thought:

"How different Claude's hands are—never thought he had got hands so nice to hold. Not limp. So magnetic, as Cynthia said."

All lax her fingers lay in the clasp (as she thought) of Claude Oddley. . . .

6

Roughly she was shaken out of that dream, and the whole of her relaxed frame jolted to a grinding shock.

As, when on a train journey at night, the sleeping

traveller, upon pulling up at the platform, scarcely knows (thus jolted violently from slumber) whether it is a collision, or merely Crewe Station! So Margaret, when the boat grounded, did not know whether it meant death on the rocks or land. Grinding of keel against beach went through her. Then through noise of wind and wave she caught her own startled, "What is it?" and the cheerful: "All right, Margaret, we've struck the island now."

Against the sky rose black heights that actually did not fall. By the boat side a figure appeared tall.

Now . . . again she felt herself lifted, carried away as if she were some limp and dangling puppet Claude doll. Then, blessed respite! she was laid down somewhere on firm ground.

Dark . . . quiet . . . safe. The air was still wet on her face, still riotous in her hair, but she was out of the wind's fury, out of the breakers' crash. These noises became a rhythmic lullaby to the deep, untroubled, normal sleep into which Margaret sunk at last.

CHAPTER II

ISLE OF BEAUTY

1

WHEN, after hours of oblivion, she stirred she found that while her face and neck were chilly, her feet and legs, as far as the knee, were being glowed upon by some strong warmth. Like a baby she rolled half-consciously towards the warmth. Warm! . . . Good! . . . Ah, delicious! . . . She dozed again. . . .

Then she gradually began to wake up in earnest, to the wonder: "Which way round is my bed? Which way am I facing?"

Shut-eyed still, Margaret felt she was lying upon something warm, though hard. "Where am I?"

Immediately she realized where she was not. Not at home, nor in the hotel at Nice, nor in the *lit-salon* traveling from Paris. Nor, thank heaven; on that awful yacht. With one hand she felt what lay beneath her.

It was curiously yielding, gritty, warm to touch. *Sand?*

Here she opened her eyes and with a thrill of pure delight saw blue sky, golden-white beach edged with red rocks and fringed by palm trees, a blue and laughing bay all empty. . . . Queer, that the immediate thought should be this— Good heavens! Was it, could it be . . . her *desert island?*

For the child has yet to be found who has not dreamed,

secretly, of escape from his everyday home to his beautiful Isle of the Sea.

Far, far away it lies; apart from meals, bedtime, "dry stockings!" drier lesson books, and the tedious tribe of grown-ups who (apparently without memory for their own childhood) impose their trammels upon the young.

"Pleased to ruin
Others' wooing!
Never happy in their own—"

That is how we appear to these dreamers of from five to fifteen years old. Some of them run older than that. Some younger. All cherish a yearning. And, since they cannot actually take ship for their perilous seas and fairy-lands forlorn, they soon find the subtler route.

Blue, bluer than any known waters gleams the lagoon that rings their Paradise; incredibly remote from Brighton Beach, Llandudno, Scarborough or any seaside to which their grown-ups have ever dragged them. More densely wooded than the Park in which they are hauled for "walks"—more vividly green than the billiard-table cloth at Grandfather's—more potently fragrant than the inside of chemists' shops to which they must accompany the shopping Nanny— How much fairer than these concrete aspects of life, and yet made up of all of them! Such is that Island of the average child's imagination.

2

Like every other child, little Margaret Verity of that Sussex cottage had cherished that vision of her own, her

darling secret isle. Ah, it had been wonderful to her! (All our islands are wonderful to us; crammed with treasure, vivid with adventure, mysterious with dream, dear and congenial with the fellowship of One, all according to our heart's desire.) Here, before Margaret's bemused eyes, stretched this picture of the actual place.

Yes, blue and gold and foliage-green were as she had seen them in a thousand dreams, and on fifty novel jackets. Dazed, bewildered and lost, she gazed at that bright landscape. She felt as one imagines souls must have felt when landed by Charon on the further bank of Lethe's stream. But when she moved, clasped her hands, stretched out her long limbs, Margaret realized that she was still entirely alive—even a little stiff. Tucked all about her she found a man's coat; dark-blue, heavy, and thickly fur-lined. This had been drawn up nearly to her neck. She put it aside, and then saw how extraordinarily she was dressed.

Over the white frock with its frieze of galloping monkeys she was wearing a thick navy-blue jersey, harsh to the touch, a world too wide for her and with scarlet streaks of something across the chest. Under the jersey jingled her bunch of gadgets. She put up her hand, found pearls still around her neck, tiny platinum watch still at her wrist. The watch had stopped at twelve o'clock—on what night or day, who knows?

Below the jersey Margaret found she had got on a short, rough, brown tweed skirt. Not one she had ever seen before. Below the tweed hem and the edge of a white tricot that showed, came a pair of stout woollen golf stockings (her mother's?). These ended in the oddest footgear that had ever covered the girl's sizable but

shapely feet—a pair of rubber ankle boots, as worn by seamen.

With an astonished glance at these Margaret rose to her feet.

She stared again about her: saw that the rocks that ran out into the water were roseate red as Devon soil. Their walls bounded the little creek. Still walking stiffly, she moved uncertainly, looking about her down the firm, sloping, blond sand, sequined with tiny glistening fragments of shell that winked in the sunlight. High-water mark looked as it looks on every beach that she ever touched; that is to say, it showed the usual garland of mussel shells mingled with dark thrown-up weed, drift-wood, halves of sea urchin, light straws, and the inevitable frail, white skeleton of some seabird to which there clung still a few damp feathers. Only six inches away the beach was flounced with lace-white foam. Behind Margaret another rosy rock towered high against the blessedly clear heavens, where gulls swooped and called. She found that she had been sleeping in a cave of that rock; this had shaded her head, even while morning sunshine, creeping up to warm her face, had flung an indigo half moon of shadow on to the goldy white sand.

“The Island! Or *an* island,” Margaret murmured bewilderedly.

“*Lord, how it looks about,*” as Miranda had said of another castaway on another island.

It was not until later that she caught sight of all the luggage with which she had been cast away—that carton box of mine which she had kicked underfoot in the deck house, and which held the roughest of rough necessities.

She moved about. As generally happens to travellers who have recently come off a moving ship, the land still seemed a little to sway and to tilt about. But it was land; blessedly solid. Blissfully warm, the sunshine went through Margaret's jersey, through her frock, right through to her comforted bones.

Two feelings were now taking hold upon her—she was very hungry, and she was alone.

She thought: "Where are—where's every one? Where are the people?"

3

People.

Remember, for a moment, what mobs of people had surrounded Margaret for the last eight or nine years, then you will get an idea of one astounding change that was to remould her.

Crowds had been always and for ever about the girl. Crowds in streets, theatre, restaurants, club. Her Hill Street staff; her bodyguard. The anonymous "surround" that opens doors, finds corner seats in railway carriages, works lifts, books reservations, drives taxis, copes with luggage for a girl in Margaret's circumstances. Always, wherever she had turned her languid, unseeing glance, there had been "people" to anticipate her every wish, from switching on lights to preparing baths for mademoiselle. Helping hands had been spread out, as on the many arms of an Indian goddess. And always the speckle of people's attentive faces, everywhere the buzz of people's eager voices:

"Are you being attended to, madam? . . . Taxi? Taxi, miss? . . ."

"Shall I tell your car to wait or to call again in ten minutes' time? . . . May I trouble you to the next department? . . . Have you given your order? . . . The lift will be down again in one moment, miss. . . . Your chauffeur has just this instant gone for the car. . . . There will be some one to serve you immediately. . . . Is anybody attending to you? . . ."

"I will send the *femme de chambre*. . . ."

"Have you everything that you require? . . . *Vous desirez, mademoiselle?* . . . Certainly, madam . . . I will see to it immediately, madam. . . . Oh, madam, I am extremely sorry that you should have been kept waiting like this. . . . Could you tell me which was the gentleman who booked your order, madam? . . . And he shall be sent to you at once. . . . I will make enquiries, madam. . . . This lady here will serve you. . . . If you would kindly ring when you are ready. . . . *Et mademoiselle?* . . ."

Invariably there had been this chorus to life's play.

Even when there was nobody else, there had always been Cynthia. ("Peggy darling, where to, now?") Or Claude Oddley. ("I say, Peggy, what time may I come for you?") Or her mother. ("Margaret, my pet, can I do anything?")

Here, for the first time, there was nobody. No voices, no hands. No one to whom to turn. No Violet. No Cynthia. No bodyguard. No Odds. At that moment she did not even recall those names, they had fallen away from her. She only realized that there was nobody there.

And for a very long time there was going to be nobody—except that one other person.

4

But she hadn't seen him yet. She saw only her solitary shadow, her own single chain of rubber-soled footmarks.

Wildly she thought: "But the fur-lined coat that was put over me—somebody must have been there? Somebody must have been wrecked here with me? Then where are they? Has everybody gone? Left me?"

No reply. No sign of other life but the airy squadron of white birds that planed and nose-dived far above the cliff. Empty sea, uninhabited shore. Beautiful blank bay a-play with ripples. But not a sail. Not a soul.

"And I'm hungry. And I'm so frightfully hungry!"

Years had passed since Margaret Verity had felt that. Not since days when she had tramped through the worst of English weathers over the Sussex Downs to some distant farm to bring back a sitting of eggs for her mother, and when she had burst in—red with rain and exercise!—to fall upon a wolf's tea.

Ritz dwellers do not know that primitive urge.

"Heavens, but I am famished! Empty as this place. Starving!"

Starving, with nothing but seaweed to eat, she stood feeling as if she had fasted for weeks . . . actually it wasn't more than five minutes since she had opened her eyes upon this fairy place.

Her helpless eyes gazed up upon the seagulls that described invisible festoons in the blue. Gulls were all right;

they knew how, when and where to swoop upon their food. It was only she, the unprepared, untrained, unarmed, underdeveloped, overcivilized human being who found herself baffled, defeated. What could she do? *What?*

5

How reassuringly human was the sound that cut the ominous quiet of the creek! Margaret, catching her breath to listen, heard—somebody whistling? Whistling quite softly the gay French fox-trot tune:

*“Oh, Mauricot, Mauricot, Mauricot—
Pourquoi ta mere t’a-t-elle fait si beau?”*

Whistling meant people. People meant food—Margaret’s one preoccupation which, for the instant, shut out all other anxieties. She *must* have something to eat. . . . Breathlessly she peered about those rocks set like pieces of stage scenery across the wings. They shut her out on the right from this unseen person who was whistling just as a man always does whistle when he is grooming a horse or himself, washing down a car, whittling a bit of wood, doing anything mechanical that occupies hands and frees mind.

The whistling ceased. The scratch of a match being struck cut through the air. There was silence. Then there was an “Ah!” of relief from Margaret, who had found her way. She had discovered the narrow corridor which ran between the rocks; she made her way over its carpet of sand and the usual beach dressing of drifted

cockle-shells, seaweed, twigs, straws and tiny bits of crab, and now she found herself at the entrance to the other beach.

This second cove was also walled by red rocks; but ah, relief; it was not empty.

The man who had been whistling was now half lying face downwards on the sand.

What Margaret first saw of him was that pair of long legs with trousers rolled up to the knee. Then his white-shirted torso, then the back of his dark head. He was intent upon the stones that he had just built up into that roughly constructed hearth. In its embrasure a handful of driftwood, twigs, placed crosswise, had been set alight.

Fire, however weakly flickering, suggested cooking! Food! The famished Margaret ran forward. Her rubber soles crunched on shell; the man turned, rising to his knees to look round at her, but there was a second's delay before Margaret recognized him.

Last time she had seen him he had been all sleek and smart in his dark suit with the thinnest of white lines; he had been wearing, also, the latest and rightest thing in grey spats, waistcoats, silk shirts, collars, beautifully knotted black ties and pearl pins; a dim-mauve carnation had bloomed in the buttonhole of the host of that yacht party.

Now here he was, a castaway with her on this desolate beach. Rumpled hair, shirt sleeves, no braces (just a broad belt of webbing, with pockets in it, clipping his well-defined waist), no collar, and with his shirt showing where the line of light sunburn divided his throat above the collar line from the V of fair skin below it.

These details were not to be taken in by a girl obsessed by hunger.

All she saw was the bonfire, all she thought of was food to be provided by the fire-maker.

“Mr. Mount—!”

“Oh, good morning, Miss Verity.”

That young man’s pleasant, casual greeting seemed to intensify the morning’s nightmare quality.

He spoke as if this were the crowded *Promenade des Anglais* at Nice, on which they were meeting the morning after a Casino party—instead of after a wreck from which they two had escaped with their lives. . . . Without another word, he stooped again, tending his fire.

“You’re here!” gasped Margaret. “Where’s everybody else . . . ? Where are we? What’s happened?”

Young Mount answered cheerfully as before, but without looking round at her again. His eyes were all for the flickering flame taking hold of those twigs.

“Breakfast is going to happen next, I hope.”

“Ah!” broke from the ravenous Margaret, caring little to whom it was she was speaking, whether it was this Mr. Mount whom she had always rather disliked or whether it was one of the sailors. She couldn’t yet think of anything but her own starvation. “Breakfast! What?”

“Fish,” explained the young man, simply. With his right hand still feeding the flames with those chips of dry wood, he held out the other, and pointed to a flat stone a couple of yards up the beach. Upon this lay a metallic, glittering line. These trout had half an hour before been darting and frolicking in their brook.

"Will you clean them and wash them out, Miss Verity, please?"

"I?" exclaimed Margaret blankly. "Clean those fish?"

"Well, I've got the fire to do, you see. I left my knife by them."

"Do you mean I shall have to cut them *open*?" demanded Margaret wildly.

"Ah, good!" exclaimed Mr. Mount—not to her at all, but to the catching twigs.

Hunger tore at Margaret like some dog that jumps up against a closed door.

The right thing, of course, was for this young man to clean and prepare and cook those fish for her as soon as was humanly possible. But, as he said, he had the fire to see to. Margaret couldn't wait for the right thing. Those fish (there were only six of them) must be got ready. And if he couldn't do it at once—

6

At any moment of any day twenty-four hours before that storm, Margaret would have told herself that she would rather die than touch those horrible-feeling, cold, smooth, dead, raw trout. As for seizing a man's jack-knife and slitting them open—

Far sooner than die, sooner than wait another moment, she found herself (with those delicate long hands of hers, on the pointed nails of which gleamed the pink polish of her last manicure) performing that grisly operation. Memories of it came to her from that Sussex kitchen. (Hideous job that it always was, is, and shall be; yes,

she did it.) "Water," she thought. "They've got to be washed now."

Aloud, she gave the order: "Water!"

The fire-maker's voice replied: "Yes, very fortunately, there is." His hand, grasping seaweed with which to damp down those flames, waved towards the rocks up-cove. Water fell in a crystal curve from the top of those rocks. A small mountain stream, taking its last gay leap, it glittered in the sunshine about ten feet above a man's height, splashed into the rock groove which it had hollowed for itself, and so rippled its way out to the bay. At the foot of this cascade Margaret frenziedly washed out those trout. Then she washed blood and scales from her hands. Next, filling her hands, she drank. Heavens, what a draught! She, sipping her way through the wine lists of Europe, had found nothing so delicious as this sharply pure stream water. Again filling that cup of her hand, she plunged her face into it. Ice cold . . . refreshing . . . making her hungrier than ever. Margaret felt for her handkerchief to dry her face. No handkerchief. Left under the bolster of her bunk.

"I say, there is enough wood ash to do those trout in now, Miss Verity."

Miss Verity, shaking off her face drops of the first cold water that had touched it for years, rubbed it hastily against her woollen sleeve, then, catching up those fish by their tails, hurried to the fire.

The wood was crackling, blazing, causing outlines of the boulder that backed the hearth to flicker as if seen through tears. Already coils of wood smoke began to make their way in spirals out to sea. Long, long ago

Jack Verity had told his child that the two first, crucial preoccupations of a shipwrecked man when cast ashore are water and fire. Now that came back to her.

Under Mr. Mount's direction she found herself (not altogether too unhandily) laying among dove-grey-and-glowing salmon-pink wood ash those six trout.

As far as Margaret was concerned, those fish might have dropped like the Israelite's manna from the pellucid skies above. Or they might have walked up the beach like the oysters in the ballad of "The Walrus and the Carpenter," without surprising her. She asked Mr. Mount nothing. . . .

Long afterwards he gave the account of how, on that first morning, he caught those brook trout, gipsy-poacher-fashion, with his hands. "Just a knack," he said lightly (inwardly pleased enough with this gift). "Poor old Charles, my brother, had it too. We used to do a lot of it together, when we were kids. . . . I don't think it's a thing you *learn*. You get to know, instinctively, the run of the water where they are, the look of the stones that they get under. You start by putting your arms out, wide, in a semi-circle, *so*. Then you close in and close in and close in on them gradually until the beggars are under your fingers, like *this* . . . then you work them and work them, like this, until you get them between the gills; so . . . then, the fish is yours. . . ." That morning Margaret wouldn't have felt interested; she was past feeling anything but naked hunger.

She fell upon a wolf's breakfast.

7

Appetite had been the one luxury which money had swept out of this girl's reach. As a quite new young heirless she had stuffed at lavishly ordered meals; and revelled in sweets between those meals. Followed the period of nibbling, instead of eating, salted almonds instead of liqueur, chocolates and drinks between nibbles. Later, the period when lunch and dinner had become mere excuses for showing off before head waiters.

"How disgraceful that a place like this should actually have a reputation for wonderful cooking!"—thus Margaret Verity, when seated at a perfectly appointed table for two at some caravanserai of the minute. "Cooking? With everything absolutely uneatable? Odds, just get them to take this all away. And mind they talk to the chef about that sauce. I suppose they'd *call* him a chef? See he's told that Miss Verity has had nothing fit to eat the last three times she's been here. What else is there? Nothing on the menu that I can touch. No *Truite meuniere*? I want to know *why* there isn't? No! Not worth waiting to have anything specially cooked. Sure to be disgusting. Come along, Odds. We'll tell everybody in London about this place: warn all our friends never to set foot in it if they don't want to be poisoned. And, Odds, send them back for my little bag with my Treasury-note case and those tickets. I left everything on the table in my haste to escape from what they've the nerve to call a 'restaurant'—"

This exhibition had taken place in days only just before that tea on the "Sweetheart II." There Miss Verity,

toying with her *Choux à la crème*, had shown off for the last time.

Followed that witch's potion, that hell-broth of an ignorantly mixed cocktail. . . .

Came that sea trip. . . .

Came those nights and days of seasickness, which had, to put it brutally, spring-cleaned a misused girlish system. They had done away with the overload of wrong foods and of drinks which had brought to the young body neither nourishment nor pleasure. Followed that enforced fast.

Now here was Margaret, so to speak, swept and garnished.

Even while Mr. Mount (also exceedingly hungry) dispatched his breakfast, he must have had an eye for the spectacle of Miss Margaret Verity, the pampered gourmet, crouched there on a boulder close to the bonfire with her hands full of trout which she herself had just cooked in the ashes.

The first trout was so hot that Margaret dropped it with a little cry. Gingerly, greedily, she picked it up again from the sand. She peeled off sandy, blackened outer skin. Impatiently she waited for exquisite inner flesh to cool. Quite possibly she never realized that she was blowing at it like a barbarian? Then she ate. Her large eyes were full of ecstasy. Rapturously, silently, she savoured this meal of a savage, eaten as a savage eats, in savage surroundings of beauty and loneliness. She ate without pausing to dip the trout, as did her companion, into a residue of salt in the fissure of the rock. She scarcely remembered that she had a companion, she did

not realize that he had allowed her four of the small trout, taking only two for himself. Without a word to him, she devoured the last ambrosial atom.

Then she drew in a draught of that heartening air. In it were mingled (as flowers in a nosegay are mingled) smell of the sea, smell of wood fire, and that pervading, poignant, aromatic fragrance which she was afterwards to know as characteristic of this mysterious island—special mélange worn by a lovely land, as a pretty woman wears a favourite scent.

"Heavenly!" breathed Margaret.

Then at last her intelligence woke up. It had been drugged first by hunger, then by satisfying hunger. Now it wished to ask a score of questions.

Leaning forward upon her boulder she began anxiously:

"Mr. Mount—?"

"Miss Verity?"

He looked straight back at her.

8

There exists a theory that those who have something to hide cannot look straight at a questioner. Holders of this theory have never been penetrated by that boyish, open, candid blue gaze which illuminated the modest, attractive face of Archie Mount.

He at that moment was cogitating: "Well, now what? What am I required to say to this infernal girl?"

The girl's thoughts came higgledy-piggledy; from a swarm of questions the most important is not always the first to clamour.

“What is this country called? Who put these extraordinary clothes on me? This old tweed skirt, whose on earth is this? And how did I get into Violet’s stockings? Are we in the tropics? What happened to your beastly yacht? Did she go down to the bottom of the sea? How about everybody on board? Where’s my uncle? Surely he was in that boat? Surely he wasn’t drowned? He spoke to me, didn’t he, when we landed? Then where did he go? How long were we at sea anyhow, before the wreck? Is this a South Sea Island, like in ‘The Blue Lagoon’ and ‘All Awry’ and ‘The Unofficial Honeymoon’ and poems by Rupert Brook? It looks just like it, but how long did we take to get here? What happened to Wallace? What’s the time, what’s the day of the week, are we still in December, and who carried me up to the cave last night—” While her mind buzzed with this, the first thing she said was:

“Oh, that man’s coat that they put over me—I left it in the cave—”

“That will be all right,” said Mr. Mount, exactly as if she had spoken of some wrap left behind in the Rolls.

Extraordinary—

So extraordinary that Margaret, opening her lips, scarcely knew which comment first to choose. And until any questions are asked, how can the questioned one tell which answers to supply? Tense silence fell for some seconds between man and girl on that solitary beach.

9

Mount found himself completely at a loss. His face betrayed by no flicker the truth. But his thoughts, could they have been printed on the unruffled brow under the far from unruffled hair, would have read: "What has happened to that old scoundrel? Why is he letting me down?"

Also the young man's whole being yearned for a pipe after his meal—and he hadn't got a pipe. Pipeless, expressionless, there he sat, inwardly seething with annoyance . . . but outwardly politely attentive to what Margaret was going to say next.

Absurdly young she looked, he thought. "Is that because I've never seen her before with a clean face?"

Unpowdered, unrouged, uncarmined, unshadowed by blue on the eyelids and with lashes from which the mastic had been well washed away by storm, with hair, a wild tangle of brown, her face must have looked more like that of the little girl who had cheered poor Charles Mount's last journey, than Charles Mount's brother had ever beheld it. The rest of her was a caricature at which the sunshine, a gleam upon her pearl string, laughed as it flung her shadow upon the sands at her oddly shaped feet. Sharp as cut metal upon those glittering sands his shadow confronted hers. There they sat, he and she! composing an illustration to one of the three oldest stories in the world: girl and man alone on a desert island. Between the castaways their primitive wood fire flickered and glowed. Facing them, the blue sea murmured and moved. Behind them rose cliff and unexplored

hinterland. The breeze tossed down a waft of scent. Gulls called in the silence. For another second the silence held. Then the girl, pushing back her hair, fastened big eyes upon the man and asked him, with agitation:

“Mr. Mount, are we the only two people on this island?”

CHAPTER III

SALT OF LIFE

1

VARIETY is the salt of life; variety and contrast were to remake existence for Margaret, thus whisked from Casino to cave!

There leave her, for the moment. Go back to the luxurious bedroom which was the last in which the ailing sybarite had slept—the largest room on the first floor of that Nice hotel.

The air of it was stuffy, steam-heated, and biteless. And how deadly impersonal is the “feel” of any hotel bedroom! Completely, its dazzling white ripolin and puffy jam-pink upholstery neutralized the atmosphere of any visitors whose hats may have been reflected in its tilted mirrors, whose toilet bottles have glittered on its glass shelves, whose wraps have dangled on its wardrobe hangers.

Here, on the morning that first saw Margaret on her island cleaning out fish—oh, contrast—here Margaret’s mother and I were putting away Margaret’s “things.”

What a chaos littered, strewn and piled bed, chairs, carpet of the bedroom—shelves, chairs, white tiled floor of the adjoining bathroom. A dust of face powder lay thick over all. There was also an odd flotsam of cosmetics mingled with drugs. Boxes of iron tablets—of

indigestion preparations in bismuth and other nostrums that had been and would for ever remain unknown to Margaret's mother, rolled here and there out of garments I took up. The body is more than raiment; what wonderful frocks the child had left! Innovation trunks disgorged pretties, frillies and boudoir fripperies. Hap-hazard her possessions were swept together. Without guidance of taste (for the heiress evidently bought things as they were offered to her), a tidal wave of spending had swamped her room with exhibits from vitrines of dress artistes, hat designers, perfumers, creators of *lingerie de luxe* bearing the maker's signature upon the hem. The name "Margaret" was scrawled in violet enamel across ivory-backed brushes, hand mirrors, powder boxes, manicure tools by the bazaarful. Yet nothing spoke of an individual Margaret—except the silver framed portrait of Jack Verity in uniform, his last gift to his little girl.

This was half hidden by a much larger photograph signed "Yevonde," showing two attenuated youths in evening dress, arm in arm, attitudinizing with opera hats, monocles and canes.

"Claude and Cynthia," sighed Margaret's mother, as I glanced at this.

"Cynthia?"

"She went to a dance dressed as Claude to see how many of their friends would take her for her brother," explained Violet Verity, sorting into pairs the frail, leg-coloured cobwebs, her child's stockings. "*They* will be here directly."

"I thought they would be here days ago."

“Something occurred to put that off, and I was so glad; but now, here they are! . . . They rang up this morning from their hotel the moment they arrived. Said they would come immediately they had had a bath and got dressed!”

“Did you tell them that she was—”

“No. Over the telephone? How could I? But now I shall have to explain to them—or rather not explain to them. Oh, dear, how complicated life is. . . . Why did I let dear Uncle Tom persuade me to agree to it?”

2

The fact was her Uncle Tom had practically hypnotized her into agreeing to it—at least into as much of it as he chose to divulge.

Gradually, deliberately, systematically, thoroughly the old sailor had set about frightening Margaret's gentle mother on the subject of her only child.

There had been many other discussions both in Hill Street and at Nice about the way Margaret was heading, about how her life in France was only London over again, only farther down the map of Europe.

Quite pitilessly he had harped upon the string of Jack's fineness compared with that of possible Oddley grandchildren.

Not such a gigantic task wearing Violet down.

Finally his ultimatum had gone forth. And he had said: “If you agree, I'll bring back to you instead of this neurotic human débris a wholesome, jolly girl. May take

weeks; may take months. Can't say which yet. Only I promise you one thing, Violet, you'll never regret handing her over to me. Will you do this?"

Greatly daring (but tremulous) Violet Verity had promised: "Very well, Uncle, I will."

Poor, put-upon Violet Verity. She was told nothing of the storms at sea or of the desert island plot.

Only she knew that there was to be an enforced setting of sails. She helped me at the last moment to put together the parcel of rough-and-ready necessities for the sea trip.

She hardly enquired why the outfit suited so little a voyage on a 200-ton yacht, fitted up as the "Sweetheart II" was with every modern convenience. She had seen me go off to that yacht party with Margaret. She had consented to take no farewell of her own child that might wake the girl's suspicions.

Yes, she had swallowed that seven-camel-power arrangement.

Now—days afterwards!—came these gnats of Oddleys.

Their names were sent up.

"The first time since we have known them that they have asked for Madame Verity. Now you must come with me—please, please—and stand by me while I cope with these two. . . ."

3

In Mrs. Verity's private sitting room we found a third young visitor.

Besides Cynthia Oddley (turned out *chic* as a magpie in black-and-white stripes, and making a sinister one-eyed

effect because of her black monocle attached to a broad black-and-white ribbon!), besides her brother Claude (Empire-waisted suit fitting him like a grey suède glove), there appeared the robust, the red-haired Eric (I never caught his surname) wearing golf kit from Loud and Giddy's, with plus fours bulging down to his ankle bones.

All three of them turned upon Mrs. Verity, after the briefest greeting, with the demand: "But what is all this about Peggy? . . . These priceless idiots downstairs telephoned that she had gone away!"

"She *has* gone away," admitted Margaret's mother.

People say nothing surprises the modern young.

Three of them, however, were for several seconds smitten speechless with amazement.

"Away? Without *us*?" From Cynthia: "Where to? Who's she *gone* with?"

"Her uncle," said Violet Verity (head well up, biting a lip that would quiver!), "insisted upon it. He—he—he—carried her off from all of us. . . . Doctor's orders. . . . So, of course, he took her—"

"*Took* her?" Cynthia was still incredulous. "How could anybody?"

"Took her where? And how long for?" came from the gaping Claude.

"I don't know. I mean, I don't quite know how long they—the—the party will take," returned Violet Verity, flurried but dignified. My old schoolfellow was standing her ground; a wrench it must have been to her to do anything so uncharacteristic. Slender and silvery. Epitome of all that was sweetest and soundest of a bygone day, she faced this Cynthia. "I can only tell you that

he has taken Margaret off, as he so much wished to do, for a long sea voyage."

A long silence of consternation.

The first sound to be made by anybody in that room came from Eric, of the bodyguard.

"Well! that's one on us, isn't it?" And he laughed.

I liked the red-haired boy for that. The Oddleys—I couldn't help thinking so!—do rather "let down" their generation. The Erics of it keep the average well up.

Picking at her dropped monocle, Cynthia broke into further exclamations: "*Peggy?* Peggy, who vowed she'd die before she set foot on a ship? Peggy never let herself be packed off like that! She'd absolutely *refuse!* You mean to say—you mean to say *Peggy went?*"

(Went, indeed. Remembering Margaret, as I had last seen her crumpled, helplessly unconscious, against deck-house cushions, I had to turn to the window. . . . Its balcony overlooked the Promenade, gay with December sunlight, with December visitors passing and repassing. I stared at cars that streaked by, long and shining as fish—at motor-bicycles, hurtling along under riders attired like deep-sea divers—English, Americans, Continentals, could be picked out one from another, even while their moving figures were no bigger than bees in the setting of orange-tree avenues, palms, cupolas, and toyish piers of Europe's most artificialized coast. I stared out, to hide my laughter.)

"Anyhow, she has gone," Margaret's mother was murmuring.

"Has she left a note? . . . No? NO? She didn't leave a line for me? . . . Or for Claude? . . . How was that?"

"I don't think she had time, Cynthia, before she went—"

"*Well!* . . . So she really has gone, then? With that old . . . with Mr. Lloyd?"

I looked round. Cynthia's sharp, boy-featured, calculating face showed a host of speculations through that wave of surprise that had first washed it blank of any expression. "Why," she exclaimed, "should Peggy do what *he* wanted? Peggy has her own money."

Completely I realized how much Miss Oddley had been building on that.

Genuine misery was assailing the brother, for less unworthy reasons. Blankly he faltered: "I have been counting the days. Counting the days, I've been, to see Peggy again. It seemed such ages. I've been feeling—" He blinked bright drops off his light lashes. They fell onto his peaked young chin, over the exquisite pearl-grey silk V of waistcoat between the lapels of his high-waisted coat. He quavered: "Feeling like death!"

His sister snapped: "Oh, for God's sake, Odds! Don't make such a blasted fool of yourself! You idiot, it's not as if Peggy had gone away to get married, or as if she had gone away from us for ever—"

"When will she be back?" appealed Lord Oddley, clearing his throat and blowing his nose on a morsel of mauve batik that spread a hit of Le Jade scent.

"When are you expecting her back, Mrs. Verity?"

Soft-hearted Mrs. Verity opened her lips—shut them. (Mr. Lloyd had stipulated that the merest incomplete outline of Margaret's doings should be given to the family Oddley.) "Her plans are so . . . so unsettled."

"Everything's settled now as far as I'm concerned

. . . that is, about going on to Cairo," mourned Claude, wretched. "I don't care to go on to Egypt without Peggy; do you, Cyn?"

"I don't," said Miss Oddley curtly (and I thought I knew why). "I'd fixed up all kinds of things . . . various amusing people that we were making a party of at the Semiramis Hotel, I'd told Margaret it would be that instead of Shepherds." (I thought I knew who would have settled bills at the Semiramis.) "Now we shall just have to muck about this mouldy coast, I suppose, until we hear what she wants us to do—"

"Yep," said Eric; "rather mouldy of Peggy leaving her bereaved pals without any faintest idea! Well, I think I shall raise a car and dash over to Sardinia or Corsica or somewhere. How would that be, Claude?"

"I don't want to go anywhere."

"Claude—mayn't I order you something to drink?"

"Oh, thanks so very much, Mrs. Verity, I don't think so—"

"I do," put in Eric with his smile. "Much sounder idea to drink a pleasant voyage to the girl and all that. I think we could all do with a side-car cocktail, if you don't mind. '*Seed-ay-karr*,' they'd call it."

"Ring the bell, Eric," commanded Miss Oddley crossly. Her unblackened-out eye still fixed Margaret's mother. Anon she demanded: "How soon do we *hear* from Peggy?"

"That I can't tell you, either. I really don't know!"

"But, Mrs. Verity—well, where does one write to her, then?"

Here Violet Verity began to look lost. Before this, I

had had to be spokeswoman in a dormitory row. I answered for her now.

"Why not write to Thomas Cook? I should put 'Care of Thomas Cook,' if I were you."

Eric, not unnaturally, asked: "Thomas Cook where?"

"Rio," said I, mentioning the first foreign port that happened to come into my head.

"Rio?" wailed Claude, dropping his jaw over that tray of cocktails which had just been brought. "But I thought Mrs. Verity said that Mr. Lloyd had swept off Peggy for a cruise in the South Seas."

"Yawp," agreed Eric (the Yale-Oxford mode had now obliterated the word "Yes" from his conversation), "Mrs. Verity did say the South Sea Islands. What's the good of writing to Margaret at Rio?"

What indeed, thought I. However.

"I should write to Rio, if I were you," I stodgily maintained. "If I write to Margaret at all, that's where I shall write."

And I looked matronly—which is always a reliable mask.

Seldom, however, have I had turned upon me a more suspicious glance than that with which Miss Oddley presently took leave of us and went out to the lift, accompanied by those other two mystified friends of Margaret.

If any of them had even for a moment guessed at the truth of what had happened, and of what was going to happen!

4

Scarcely had the three left us than a tap at the sitting-room door heralded the small liveried chasseur who brought up a cable for me.

"May I?" (I had not yet had time to exchange a word with Violet about the interlude just over.)

"Oh, please do. . . . It is all right? You won't have to leave me for a little, will you?"

"Oh, no. It's all perfectly all right."

I folded up the cable; put it very carefully away.

This was what it had said:

"All well trip panned out according to plan Margaret now sleeping like child please dispatch mail as arranged and await further communications cordial greetings Lloyd."

CHAPTER IV

QUERIES

1

NOW leave again the Riviera coast, the cosmopolitan crowds—seeking cocktail bars, halts of aperitif. Leave the Oddleys at a window table in the sunniest corner of the Ruhl, to watch the passing show of Argentine adventuresses, gesticulating Jew millionaires, lounge lizards wearing boy mannequin suits on their wispy forms and sepia half-moons beneath their sombre, rolling eyes—leave them to watch these and to discuss again and again the mystery (“for there is something infernally mysterious”) of Peggy’s sudden flight.

Return to that girl about whom all this coil was made. Return to that far beach of the bonfire, that untrodden, sunny solitude, where she sat, saying to her fellow cast-away:

“Mr. Mount. Tell me. Are we the only two people on this island?”

“I haven’t been all over the island yet,” said young Mount.

What else could he say? For a dozen reasons he felt more and more uncomfortable. With his brogued heel he smoothed the kicked-up sand about his boulder. To play for time, that was what he had got to do, he supposed. He said: “I don’t know who or what might be here. You see—I’ve only had time to go up stream a bit.

And to explore this creek—and that one you came out of. And that other one.” Jerking his dark head backwards, he put up his hand with a gesture of irritation towards the hair usually admirably brushed, seal finished—now taking every direction on his head. “Regular chain of these little bays, there seems to be along this bit of coast—”

“It is an island, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” (He was thankful that this at least was the truth.) “It’s an *island* all right, Miss Verity.”

“And my uncle?”

Mr. Mount was silent—as well he might be.

“Is he on the island?”

“Miss Verity, I don’t know—on my solemn word of honour, I do not know. I wish to God I did. He may be on the island.” And behind these jerked out sentences fury seethed in Mount’s heart.

2

For this was what the young man thought:

“The old scoundrel. The old ruffian. Takes my word of honour and leaves me in this predicament. Serve him right if I blew the whole gaff. Serve him right if I said to the girl: ‘Now look here, I’ll tell you the whole story. You’ve been spirited away here under false pretences. That was no more of a storm last night than it’s been for a week of nights. You wouldn’t have thought so, you poor kid, if you hadn’t been so ill for days. The ‘Sweet-heart II’ no more sprang a leak and went to the bottom of the sea than you are at the bottom of the sea

yourself. You aren't on any desert island either. It's where your uncle thought you ought to be. This was his nearest attempt at it. He means to keep you here for how long I don't know. But, anyhow, that was his funeral. At least I thought it was. I was given to understand that he wouldn't leave you once he landed you. I took it that he'd be here the whole time to see that you kept to this bit of beach and didn't get wandering about and finding out that you weren't twenty-four hours' sail from the French coast. He landed you here last night, and this morning when I went to call the old rascal he'd disappeared, leaving a note that says nothing, dropped down by a stone close to my head—

“‘He's gone off, he's broken his share of the bargain and so I break mine—’

“I can't do that,” young Mount decided inwardly. “It's a lesson to me. Never put yourself under an obligation to any man again so that he has any claim on you. That old scoundrel, Lloyd, has more than paid himself back by this for anything he did for me—

“Leaving me here stranded, perhaps for the entire morning, with this infernal girl—

“Where's he got to? Gone off with the boat too—

“Well, I suppose he'll be turning up in an hour's time or so? Meantime—

“What am I to say to her? Query.”

3

He stared away from the girl's bewildered, freshened face when he spoke next:

"Miss Verity, I—I wouldn't be too much distressed if I were you. Oh, I know that that's an odd thing to say, seems odd considering what's happened—I mean considering the circumstances. But I have an idea—I wouldn't mind betting that Mr. Lloyd will turn up presently—to find we've eaten all the breakfast."

"But the others? The sailors? Wallace?"

"I haven't seen a trace of one of those fellows either. Not a trace. But don't worry too much about them, Miss Verity—"

"I am not worrying, but I must ask you what you know. It's less worrying than having you treat me as if I were a baby," said Margaret, not unreasonably—in fact, more reasonably than Mount had yet heard the "infernal girl" speak. "Did the sailors get off in the other boats? Then there is hope for them?"

"Yes, oh, yes. Plenty. Jolly good boats the 'Sweetheart II' had—has."

"You mean they've a good chance of getting somewhere—or of being picked up—"

"Ah, they've every chance," replied Mount. "A pity we got separated from them at all." And she did not know that he was getting his teeth into that reply.

"And how long do you suppose we shall have to stay?"

"To stay? Here?"

"Yes"—Margaret's dazed little voice sounded an irrational, illogical, unexpected note of positive exhilaration (could it be?) as she uttered the words—"here on this desert island."

Secretly young Mount fumed. "She's swallowed it.

She's asked for it. She's got to have it then. Ten thousand curses on my having been dragged into standing the first of the racket alone!"

He answered her: "I wish to God I had any idea of how long we shall—we shall stay. How can I tell you, though?"

"No, I suppose you can't. Of course you don't know where we are. Was there no sign of the yacht either?"

"Not a sign, Miss Verity" (dismally).

"Well. These things do happen," said, quite unexpectedly, the sailor's daughter.

"I suppose," she added presently, staring out to sea, "I suppose what we have to hope for now is the chance of our being sighted and taken off by some ship? People nearly always are, aren't they? Comparatively soon. Ships do pass this island, I suppose, if it's near enough to the course of ships to have been wrecked. Other ships will pass?"

"Good Lord, yes! and—" Only just in time Mount checked himself from mentioning a well-known aëroplane service. "There's sure to be a boat along presently or—or something," he tried to comfort her. She was taking it less impossibly than he would have credited her for, say on that evening at the Berkeley.

"In the meantime," she said, "in the meantime, here we are."

"Apparently," agreed Mount tersely.

"And what do you think we had better do, Mr. Mount?"

"Do?"

Stooping, Mr. Mount picked up a bit of heavier wood which had fallen from the top of the bundle on his bon-

fire. He made the movement to gain time and hide his face, but it brought an idea.

"I might start hacking out a couple of forks for us to eat our fish with next time," he suggested; thankful, too, to have hit upon something to do with his hands. One of them went to his trousers pocket, then to the divisions in his belt.

"My knife—"

"Oh! I left that," explained Margaret the leaver, "by the waterfall—"

Mr. Mount sprang up and strode to the rock, moving as usual with that gentle daintiness of a very large dog.

Margaret, annoyed, thought he might have waited until she had finished talking to him before he retrieved the precious knife. But she wished she had not at that moment forgotten it.

He brought it back, got his piece of wood, sat down on his boulder again to whittle. His eyes were fixed on his work as he said to Margaret in a voice that somehow struck her as not quite natural: "A piece of luck that I did not leave my knife in the yacht. And that I remembered matches and a few things. There was a parcel or something in your cabin that they shoved into your boat. I shoved it into that little cave place of yours. Were you fairly comfortable last night?"

"Comfortable? I suppose so. I mean, I was too fast asleep to know. I must have been comfortable, mustn't I? May I stay there?"

"Stay there, Miss Verity?"

"I mean may I keep that cave for my own, for my sleeping room?"

She had swallowed it. The whole farce she'd swallowed just as that old ruffian of a Lloyd had meant her to. And he, Mount, who had told the old man he didn't believe he could get away with it, here he found himself involved and helping its further progress.

"Of course. Stay in the most sheltered spot, Miss Verity—until something happens."

"Yes."

A pang took the shipwrecked girl. "Shelter" meant now just an arch of rock over her head. Sand under her! All around the unexplored.

4

She thought of Hill Street.

Her own establishment—its resilient beds! Its soft, ribbon-bound blankets! Its thickly puffed satin eider-down quilts! Its double windows, heavily curtained against any breath of London's winter!

Far away in London, the moist and foggy cold invaded the streets and turned people into shivering bundles of damp clothing. Even now the black-bonneted flower-seller at the corner proffered holly and mistletoe with those exiled blossoms from the South of France—carnations, the first of the mimosa. Lumbering motor-buses were posterred with advertisements for Grand Christmas Bazaars.

All utterly remote! Like thinking of another planet . . . here in this warm sunshine, in these breezes invigorating, yet temperate.

But the thought of London brought back to her again who she was.

She gave her little arrogant, discontented frown. She threw a languid glance at her fellow castaway. Reluctantly she admitted: "Well, if that is the best place I suppose I had better have it—"

"Good," said Mr. Mount, suppressing a smile. For through his furious annoyance with Mr. Lloyd, there struggled through his sense of the grim humour of the situation. Since he was to be left in charge of it evidently for an hour or so, he may as well play up.

"Very well, Miss Verity, that cove will have to be your room, so to speak. This one, here, with the bonfire and the water must be our general sitting-room. I suppose I shall have to doss by the fire so as to keep it going at night. That's the most important thing at the moment; to keep the fire alight."

"Of course. Even I knew that. And presently, of course, you will build up the great stack to make the blazing beacon—"

"The—?"

"The blazing beacon, of course. To attract the attention of any passing vessel."

"Oh—quite," answered Mount, after a second's industrious whittling at the thick end of his driftwood. Anything not to have to discuss—until the old man came along and made it clear what they were going to discuss.

"As a matter of fact we might start getting more fuel together now."

Margaret, getting to her feet, glanced about her and actually seemed ready to begin collecting twigs.

He commented: "There's only very small stuff about on this beach. Can't keep much of a fire going with snippets and scraps. The only two big bits got burnt up at breakfast-time. Now what I think had better be done is for me to leave you."

"Leave me?"

"Not for long and I shan't be far off, I promise you. I—I can't be," the young man said, again privately gritting his teeth. "What I had better do is get up that cliff there—er—find out what timber there is about, and have a look-see generally."

Secretly he promised himself that he would intercept that old ruffian Mr. Lloyd's entrance and give him a thorough telling off before he went down to his "infernal," but misled, niece.

"Oh, I'll come with you, Mr. Mount."

"You can't. We can't possibly both go—"

"Why not?"

"Because"—bright thought—"some one has got to stop by this bonfire. If you don't mind, Miss Verity, you must stay where you are.

"And please," he added very anxiously, "don't go out of this creek and the one to the right."

For these were the bounds that the old ruffian had set some time ago.

"Promise you won't leave this bit of beach in between until I come down again. You will promise me that, won't you?"

"I promise," she said—and it was in that voice of a

child put on its honour not to go beyond the garden gate.

"She is just a kid," the young man told himself exasperatedly, as he turned to the easiest upward slant among the rocks at the foot of the cliff. "Dashed if I'm cut out for a kid's nurse, though . . ."

She, watching, saw the big figure in shirt and trousers swing itself lightly up between boulders and low-growing bushes. Saw it cut out dark against blue, where sky met cliff-line.

It disappeared.

"Not even waving his hand," thought Margaret. "Never mind, quite a comfort to be alone again. . . . What do I do now?"

CHAPTER V

OTHER SIDE OF EDEN

1

MEMORIES of everything she had heard and read about "people on desert islands" went through Margaret's head.

Uninterruptedly *busy* these people seemed. Building. Planting. Manufacturing bows and arrows. Fishing. Collecting bread-fruit. Bringing down birds or small deer. Curing skins in the sunlight. Instantly concocting their own civilization in their wilderness!

The overcivilized, the ultra-modern Margaret only now began to realize how wonderful, how efficient, how resourceful, how superior had been these other castaways.

"I ought to do some work—"

As a child she had been left alone often enough on the seashore. Here, presently, she reverted to childish activities of those days.

First it was the flat stone to find—then it was digging a hole in the sand to bury that little heap of fish spines, which was all that there remained of their breakfast. That, too, was a memory of far-off days when her mother had taught her the enormity of throwing sandwich papers about to spoil the lovely out-of-doors.

Now she buried debris as carefully as if she were twelve years old; she patted sand down above it . . . a detail of

the smallest kind, yet it seemed to stand between Margaret and the utter seriousness of the situation in which (as she believed) she now found herself. Shanghaied! Shipwrecked! Marooned! Without any clothes but these odd garments over the flimsy frock in which she stood up! Alone, with one other person! Without a notion what had happened to the others! Without knowing where her next meal would come from! Practically without shelter for her head! But what struck her as most extraordinary was that, though she *should* have been dazed with misery, anxiety, suspense—though she *ought* to have felt like death—

Miraculously, she didn't.

The island sunshine was ever warmer upon her. The breeze tossing her hair had actually begun to fill her with fresh life.

Incredibly, but urgently, the presentiment filled her: "I shall never be unhappy on this island!"

2

If she was destined to be not unhappy, she was presently going to be fairly uncomfortable!

But for the first part of the morning the sense of novelty inspired her as she sped up and down the lonely beach, busy as a bee on the first sunshiny day. To and fro she moved; stooping, gathering twigs, washed-off branches, any odd bits of wood. Stacking it up beside the red boulder upon which young Mount had laid his roughed-out wooden fork, she collected quite a pile.

With pride, the girl who had not for nine years done a hand's-turn, regarded this work of her own hands! Presently she would make another heap, of seaweed for damping down the fire. Now and again she fed the fire between those flat, smoke-blackened hearthstones; she crouched, holding her hands to the heartening glow. She was optimistic, amused at the thought of that young man's surprise when he came!

His return was shown at last by this: down the cliff-side there was siding, in jerky spasms, two tree branches which seemed to be moving "on their own." Mr. Mount, dragging them, was nearly hidden by foliage. Under the rustling, sweeping, Birnamwood-like load, he struggled down between those boulders in full sunshine. Staggering down to the level, he dragged the branches along the sand.

Half a dozen paces away from the bonfire he let the burden go, straightened himself, and with a grunt drew his forearm across his glistening wet forehead.

Margaret, so new to the idea of manual labour, could only think of her own achievement. Proudly she called to him to look, pointing to her own small heaps of fuel. She was surprised that Mr. Mount, heated and breathing quickly, only glanced cursorily. True, he said, "Good; what a lot you've collected!" (That young man would retain his politeness in the front row at an earthquake.) "But I'm afraid, you know, that this won't last very far through the night—"

"*Won't* it?" (After she had been working for hours!)

"Afraid not . . . I shall have to get down some more of these boughs," said he. "I wrenched off what I could."

"Where from?"

"A sort of grove place about a hundred yards up on the top of the cliff."

"Then of course I shall come and help you," she suggested with the keenness of the novice, "to drag some of it down."

That, of course, might be a good thing, he thought; just to pass the time away, and it would prevent his having to chat to her. Wiping his forehead again, he looked doubtfully at the girl's lean, overgrown figure. "I don't know whether you'll be able to manage, Miss Verity."

"Manage? Why on earth shouldn't I?"

Indeed, why should this man put her down as a fool—soft, slack, an encumbrance? Did he imagine that she was good for *nothing* on desert islands? At the bottom of Margaret's heart, long-dormant instinct whispered: "Got to rise to the occasion . . . behave well in difficulty as well as in danger. You're a sailor's daughter."

She looked up into the young man's face. It had reddened slightly; freckles stood out on that light flush.

She noticed now that he was more deeply concerned than before.

Quickly she asked: "Has anything happened? Anything *worse* happened, I mean?"

"Oh, nothing. . . . That's just it—I mean nothing at all, Miss Verity."

"I feel you are so bothered."

"That," said Mount, "is quite natural, isn't it?"

"Yes. Of course. But it isn't only that. I believe—"

"What?"

"I believe you are wishing to goodness that you had been wrecked here with my uncle, or Wallace, or one of the sailors, or anybody but me. Now, aren't you?"

"Well—"

"Yes. You are. Just because I am a girl," said she, facing him angrily, but not with the peevish anger she had previously shown. "You think I shall be no earthly good on this desert island. You think I shall be able to do nothing. Do you suppose I never helped my father to build bonfires? I know a great deal about all these things, really. We'll have to make a great big woodpile. Come along!"

3

Eve, turned out of Eden, was probably the first woman to respond to the woman's stimulus—change. Adam, the first conservative, must have glanced back, regretfully, at a lovely lazy garden where the work did itself—the place which he had always known. But one can imagine Eve's eyes, gazing ahead with eager curiosity to Outer-Eden!

So with Margaret on her first island afternoon.

Quite good fun it would be, convincing this anxious, bothered man that she could help to do a man's work, showing him that she, too, could "make good" in a crisis. She enjoyed that first clamber up the cliff, past red rocks, in and out of grey boulders and scrub. Higher, higher—until they sighted that grove and those other boulders beyond it, and those rising cliffs of grey, almost pearly white in the sunlight, which was as far as Margaret could see of her island. . . . Helping herself along by grab-

bing at the scrub between the boulders, she smelt at the fragrance left on her palm by a grey-green plant (big as the bush of southernwood at the Cottage gate), which she had grasped.

“What’s this plant? . . . Everything here smells so lovely when you crush it underfoot! Better—much better than *après la pluie*. . . . This smells like something I know, though. Reminds me of something I’ve *tasted*. What’s it . . . what’s it called, Mr. Mount?”

Young Mount apologized for being not much use at plant names. He had just been going to pronounce the word “vermouth,” but “vermouth” is not a tropical plant, and he mustn’t set the “infernal girl” asking him more awkward questions. So he quickened the pace—and she, panting, breathing from parts of her lungs that for long hadn’t been brought into play, drew in the scent of the basking aromatic tangle that caught at her knees as she climbed.

“This must be what makes the breeze of the island smell so—so delicious.”

“I suppose so,” agreed Mr. Mount.

The distracted young man cared little enough what anything smelt like. He was in a fume of worry and impatience and he had to conceal it.

How long was that old rascal going to leave him here with this “infernal girl” who believed that he and she were the newest thing in Robinson Crusoe couples—and who would have to be kept in that belief?

He had given his word. . . . Unhesitatingly he had given his word to old Lloyd. . . . And in that note of this morning old Lloyd had scribbled:

"Am trusting M. to you until I return. Uncertain when this will be. Keep all dark, as arranged."

"*As arranged*" . . . one of the old ruffian's favourite phrases!

Mount would have to fall in with it—letting this helpless flapper who climbed the hill beside him imagine—well, everything that she was imagining. He wouldn't be able to leave her even for an hour—even though two hours would have brought them well within reach of every human amenity.

Here they were, abandoned, quite as thoroughly as if they were at the other side of the world, to a naked struggle for food and warmth.

"Very well," thought Mount, damping down his fury for the present. "*Keep it up . . . !*" And when he and the girl arrived at the rough, natural terrace on the cliff and the grove of eucalyptus, of ilex, of olive, he did fling himself into the part and exclaim convincingly that it was a pity his knife wasn't a bit stouter, and that if he snapped the blade it would be fatal.

"Of course," mused Margaret earnestly. "The only thing we have to cut our fish up with or anything!"

"I'm going to swarm up there," Mount told her, measuring with his gaze the height of the next bough which he meant to bring down. "I shall hack halfway through that fellow; then hang on to it and bring it down by my own weight. If you wouldn't mind just standing out of the way, Miss Verity—"

Miss Verity, hastily stepping aside in the scrub, stood and watched him at work.

Yes; fascinated, she watched the young man swarm up the nearest eucalyptus, attain his bough, fling a long leg across. She watched him shift himself into position to shift and hack. She watched him swinging, tugging. A crack! . . . Further rustling and cracking, and the leafy bough dangled. Dragging the long strip of bark away from the bright scar on the trunk, it fell. It bore him down into the scrub, on his back. He picked himself up with a shake, a little nod. Grunting involuntarily, he twisted the bough finally from the trunk, pulled it free, flung it aside.

"Very strong, isn't he?" thought Margaret, watching.

As it was probably the first time for years that she had given to any man more than a casual, languid, unseeing glance, it is perhaps worth while to record the impression made upon her, by this being who (lately so elegant in drawing-rooms!) now moved so determinedly, perspiring, breathing deeply, wrestling with his tree, but mastering it as completely as she, after effort, could master a deeply rooted dandelion. . . .

Eve, beholding Adam for the first time in the sweat of his brow wrestling with forces of nature, possibly found him better worth watching than when he lolled in that orchard at her side?

Now the sight of presentable young men was no novelty to Margaret. Had she not lived surrounded by the creatures? But what attention had she paid to the actual looks of that bodyguard who started cars, carried wraps, held open doors, picked up programs for her? Never had

it struck her to observe height, build, movements, gestures of these comely attendant youths. "I never notice men's *looks*," she had admitted—when Cynthia Oddley had exclaimed: "Men *are* so hideous!"

Is that point of view spreading? Girls say: "It doesn't matter what the *bridegroom* is like to *look* at, does it" (this ominous remark I have myself heard girls make), "as long as the *bride* is pretty?" Very young girls gravitate towards the lovelier schoolfellow. During school days that is natural enough—but is it a good sign when, in their late teens and twenties, they fail (as Margaret had failed) to find the man better worth looking at? To have the ideal of all beauty fixed at feminine beauty *only* is but a one-sided vision. Some girls cherish it. To these, men become less and less. Already men have become to them infinitely less than the shop-window spread with smoothly alluring fabrics or deeply caressing furs. Soon, in some girlish eyes, men will be mere solid, oblong slabs of matter, taking up so much cubic space and obscuring so much sunlight. Men, who could not fathom the depths of stagnant indifference under the pretty, girlish, incessant ripples of seeming interest! It's not a good sign! Whose fault is it?

Partly, perhaps that of the everyday clothes of men which so obscure them: the levelling shapes, the earth colours, depressing drabs, thundercloud indigos that they will wear. . . . A Nemesis, too, upon that changeless black-and-white which is the foil for women's multicoloured evening bravery (who will weave their *repoussoir* into their romance?). . . . Partly it may be that the masculine form, at its best in strenuous movement, is not often

enough seen by the gently bred feminine contemporary, except in games and sports. These remain the last stronghold of male prestige. Hence flapper worship of "the crews." Hence "the numbers of well-dressed women among the spectators" in accounts of prizefights.

Always watching young Mount, Margaret was pervaded by a brand-new respect for a man's strength; but only subconsciously did she then take in his gracefulness under those rough garments, or notice how much younger-looking he now was because of the rumpled hair, the flush on his fair skin, the "come-alive look" of a man actively engaged in work that takes his mind as well as his body. Consciously she only thought that he was strong, swift, handy, good at these outdoor things. She only wondered, while she waited for him, what she would have done if she had been left here all by herself without this man?

Terrifying idea. . . . Instinctively it drove her a step nearer to where he worked.

5

Presently he turned, remarking to the sun-bathed, fragrant landscape at large: "That's enough. Better not leave that fire too long. We'll cart this lot down now. Now, if you don't mind hanging on to this, here—"

Obediently Margaret hung on to that branch. Down the slope they made their way; hauling rustling branches, catching a bough now and then on a boulder-angle; now and then slipping a foot, bringing down a miniature landslide. Down to the Bonfire Creek they made their arduous way—he and the "infernal girl."

Reaching the beach they threw down the load, stoked up their fire, turned again to the cliff. Twice, three times, they made that journey, each time exchanging fewer words. Mount had plenty to think about. Margaret had enough to do to keep the young man from seeing that, though she had begun stout-heartedly her afternoon of toil, her heart was now failing her. . . .

6

Before you are hard on the girl, think what her life of the last years had been; think how flaccid were the muscles of her overgrown, underexercised, unused body! The only physical activity she had known had been dancing, and these were not dancing muscles which were now brought into play. She became footsore, weary; her back seemed breaking. After the last of those climbs, those drags back, trailing boughs that grew ever more cumbersome, Margaret's limbs also seemed too weighty for her to lift, too shaky for her to guide.

Her heart pounded. Her face streamed. She set her teeth so as not to gasp. . . .

Not so long before, the car had been ordered to take Miss Verity from hotel to milliner's a stone's throw away down the Boulevard; to wait for two hours, and then to take her back again. But the enervated Miss Verity who owned that Rolls and who chose those hats in fives—with no price mentioned!—was a later development than the sturdy little Margaret who had dug sweet-pea trenches in that Sussex garden. We grow from our roots. We return to our beginnings. With surprising quickness

Margaret Verity began going back to that basis of healthy, well-inherited pluck, of sticking things out.

So she set her teeth as she tugged her branch down the cliff. She dragged it right up to the pile; and only then she dropped it. She dropped it so suddenly that young Mount, stacking up his own bough, looked sharply round.

In consternation he ejaculated: "Good Lord! you're all in. . . . *Oh—*"

CHAPTER VI

THE MOCK BROTHER

1

SHE held her tousled brown head well up as she replied that she was all right; that she could go on again in a moment if she took a little rest.

But then her head dropped. The whole of her young length drooped, like one of those cut boughs, to the beach. Hardly knowing what was happening, she was just conscious of firm, warm, shirt-sleeved arms put about her. She sensed the comfort of human warmth, contact, of a low-pitched voice that quietly said: "All right. That's all for you, Miss Verity; I'm going to take you to your cave now. Come along—"

Through that rock passage he supported her into the creek on which she had opened her eyes an eternity of experiences ago. Again all sense of time had left Margaret. Then and there she could have fallen asleep as she walked those few steps. Her eyelids drooped over her eyes; she had to force them open again, to fix them on his face. . . .

She was just sufficiently awake to see how (encouragingly, gently) he smiled at her as they reached the cave.

"Sit down a minute." He knelt. He scooped out in the sand a small hole that she did not realize yet was the campaigner's groove for the hip-bone. Through closing eyes

she watched him. Sunset of peach-and-amber, making glorious the sand, turned to softest rose-colour the ordinary white shirt, which was clinging to the young man's shoulders and back.

"You ought to have a coat on," Margaret murmured. "*You* ought to put on that motor-coat—"

It sounds an ordinary remark? Possibly it sounded ordinary to him. But the reason it marked an epoch was because it was for the first time since she had left Sussex that the girl had considered the comfort of some one else.

"I'm all right. I've got a sweater. Yes, honest Injun. I have. I'm going to sleep in that. Anyhow, it won't be cold here, even at night. Providential, isn't it, this weather? Now! I shall tuck you up like a baby—"

His voice was the voice of some man talking to a sick puppy. Some men are as indulgent to babies, children, ailing women as others are with animals beloved.

"—like a baby, in this. I say, Miss Verity! you didn't happen to look in the pockets of that coat of mine last night?"

"It was your coat then?"

"You didn't look in the pockets? No? Well, look here now."

His hand (green with tree mould, black with smoke) held out a blue-wrapped packet.

"Chocolate?" Naturally enough the wretched child (his thoughts dropped the "infernal girl" for the time being; she was now the "wretched child") was once more starving. "Chocolate!"

"And some water-biscuits."

"Good heavens, are there?" Margaret cried greedily. "I thought—I thought we should have to be rationed, like people are, to one meal a day."

"We'll see about that, later. There will be a small sit-down supper to-night, though."

Sharing that supper of a quarter-of-a-pound, each, of nut chocolate, of water-biscuits and of spring-water, which he brought to her in an oyster shell, these toilers satisfied a part, at least, of their ravenous hunger. Then he disposed about her the heavy, fur-lined motor-coat, thicker than blankets.

"Don't stir to-morrow morning. Well, I'm afraid you won't be able to. I'll do the breakfast trout. [First catch your trout, of course.] You sleep. You stay lying there, until the stiffness goes off. I'm afraid you can expect to be stiff all right," he warned her with that new gentleness of tone.

Inwardly he fumed: "*If* this miserable kid were a boy now! I could fix her—give her a good rub-down, and a massage. . . . Devilish awkward! . . . Infernal shame. Probably all this is the best thing for her . . . but, Lord!" Outwardly he said:

"I'm afraid that's all I can do for you!"

"Thank you most awfully, Mr. Mount."

"Good night!"

"Good night!"

Before the sound of footsteps crunching shells had died away, Margaret had again forgotten tiredness.

No difference did it make that, after last night's wreck, she had slept for so many hours the sleep of the dead.

Again she was thus asleep. She slept, while the last of the sunset faded, while the island dusk fell, while the island night, velvet and jewelled, cast further magic over that faërie land. Hour after hour Margaret slumbered under the stars, sunk in unconsciousness which, once, a vague dream invaded. Dimly out of depths there simmered up the peaky wistful face of young Oddley. She just noticed that he had dark hair instead of his albino plumage, and that he seemed to try to kiss her, and that she seemed to say: "No; don't do *that*, Odds. Hold my hand instead. Like in the boat . . . I don't *mind* you holding my hand . . ." The black cloud of unconsciousness fell again, wrapping her round. . . . She slept.

2

Naturally she woke up unable to move; stiff, sore, aching violently in every muscle that cried out against the sudden demand which yesterday had put upon it!

The first day out across country after the beagles! The first hockey-match, after you have been laid up with influenza! Your first swim of the season, if you've not been in the water all winter! Your first morning of trying new and specially vigorous "jerks"— Think of the sequel to these. All those sensations, multiplied by ten, give but the merest inkling of how Margaret felt; the wretched child.

Just as she realized her acute discomfort, she heard sounds from the "next-door" creek, the crunching of feet on shells, the low whistling, the voice of Mr. Mount humming softly a snatch of the old song "Botany Bay":

“And the Captain and all of the crew,
And the first and the second class passengers,
Knows what us poor convicts goes through.”

Crash—a bough went onto the pile. Then:

“Awake, Miss Verity?”

“Yes,” she called back.

“May I bring you your breakfast?”

“Please—” The word ended in a wince of pain.

“Right! I’m coming in now.”

He came; he seemed a heavenly visitant.

Unutterably comforting and kind, he helped Margaret—that very sore, sick puppy!—to drag herself out of her rock shelter into full sunshine.

For this was all the medicine available for the “wretched child” on this desert beach. Here were no creams, no embrocations, no lotion, no Pond’s Extract, no healing witch hazel. Only the doctoring of sleep that rebuilds, of quiet, of sun and air that remake, that restore and are food—better even than food.

Food, however, he brought to her; carried, tray-like, on a flat stone with wooden implements that were still more like firewood than forks, he served her breakfast of fish *à la* Lake-Dweller; and, more! he held out two oranges.

“Oranges!” Margaret exclaimed, overjoyed at sight of golden gifts which civilization has made of no value. “Are there oranges growing on this island?”

“Er—a few, apparently. I got hold of this couple. Now don’t move about! Keep still.” (For again she had winced as she tried to sit up.) “I’ll peel them for you.”

Positively he waited upon her as if she had been a

baby ("from the month") and he the maternity nurse-born-and-not-made. His foresight, his gestures, his big-dog gentleness, his consideration struck this girl as though she had never before known what it was to be waited upon.

Ingenuously she thought: "If I'd had a brother, this is what he would have been like."

3

He might. Or he might not. A brother may mean anything; everything; or nothing. The brother who is also the chum brings the nearest unspoilt intimacy in which man can approach girl (cutting out the illusive intimacy of passion). The brother who is *not* the chum can be the root of all sex-antagonism. Years of solace from other people's brothers may be required to undo the mischief which the "own" brother has wrought at home!

Between these two poles the average brother is put by the average sister in a class apart from men ("Oh, you can't count just the boys!") . . . He is connected with nothing that may lie ahead for her. He, however, learns about women from her. ("My sister, I remember, always said or did so-and-so.")

Roughly the girl with brothers can scarcely be distinguished from the girl without.

But the sisterless boy remains in his relation with the sister-sex a little handicapped through life.

To Margaret, the only child, it certainly seemed that the big, young man in shirt sleeves kneeling on the sand and obviously needing a shave, was the very perfect gentle brother she had missed . . .

She turned to him. How childishly she exclaimed:
“You are most awfully good to me!”

And with what heartening cheerfulness he gave back:
“Ah, don’t be silly!”

4

And still she never guessed the savage annoyance, the exasperated suspense, simmering beneath his gentleness for her.

She thought (and in a way she was right): “He’s reserved. He’s a very reserved young man. I wonder when he will begin to talk to me, like they do on islands, about what he really thinks?”

In spasms of irritation he thought:

“*This* has torn it! A night and a day, and now another night, left here . . .

“Did the old blackguard mean this? This is what he mapped out for the ‘wretched child.’ I know. So far it’s according to programme for her. ‘Work her like a black, see she gets food, not too much of it, make up with fresh air, and keep her to this side of beach.’ That means *I* can’t go off duty . . .

“Oh, it’s a merry job of work . . . As for him, this will wash out everything, once he turns up. Where is he? Locked up in a lunatic asylum is where he ought to be, of course, but what a hope! I bet he’s found the most comfortable pub in reach, and that he is spreading himself all over interfering with the management at this minute. . . .

“And here I’ve got to stop. . . . *We’ve* got to stop.

“Lord, how I should enjoy burning him like a Guy Fawks in that bonfire!

“He’s getting all the fun out of it, and he’s stuck me down as something between a kid’s nurse, a guardian angel, and a warder to convicts. And for how long, I’d like to know?”

CHAPTER VII

MIRROR OF VENUS

1

ALL that morning Margaret lay in the eye of the sun; Mr. Mount's handkerchief, wrung out in cold cascade water, shielded her forehead. Amazing how soon she began to feel that she was restored, and that the worst of the ache was over, and that she could help once more with the woodpile!

"No. To-morrow, perhaps. To-day take it easy. Now I'm going up that cliff again and you are going to promise me to stay lying down here until midday. You promise? Good. Very well, set your watch by mine. You should be able to tell the time by the height of the sun."

Incredibly, she slept again until he came back.

He came back with as little satisfaction to himself as he had gone.

There had been no sign of that unscrupulous old ruffian.

This was no accident. Had there been accident or mishap, somehow (he knew) word would have been conveyed. This was the deliberate, harebrained scheme to let somebody else take on the nuisance, the *corvée* of that "infernal girl."

Very well; oh, very well. He, Mount, would see pres-

ently just how plain he could make it to the old man what any decent people thought of him.

Meantime he admitted it was not the girl's fault; she suffered, poor kid!

She was bucking up. He dropped the tone as to a sick puppy. . . . Casual, but friendly, he suggested that perhaps Miss Verity might now pick her bathing place. He'd gone in early from the Bonfire Creek. She, perhaps, would choose the creek of her cave?

2

The moment Margaret was alone she made ready for that dip, seeing for the first time the sea as a shimmering invitation. Ah, blessed relief of getting out of clothes so long worn!

Off these lendings—Guernsey and tweed skirt. Off came the dingy, crumbled tricot. Off, the silken elastic corset belt. Off, filmy layers of French lingerie—pale yellow and once dainty as petals of a new-opened Iceland poppy. Ah, but they were the worse for a wreck, and for stale scents *plus* steam yacht atmosphere and an afternoon of navy-work! Enthusiastically Margaret peeled the wrappings from her, left them held down by stones from blowing about on the beach, tucked away with them her wrist-watch and clattered gadgets, and turned to the smiling sea.

Did a thought come to her of Deauville bathing kit? Vermilion rubber turban; scarlet satin, skirted tunic and knickers, patterned with white dolphins and ending in opera length stockings of scarlet silk? With these she

had worn beach shoes of white kid laced criss-cross up the calf; she had worn a wrap of white proofed satin stencilled with gigantic orange starfish. Marvellous it had looked in the *Tatler* photograph, billowing, flapping in the breeze against a glimpse of Plage, of stagy Casino architecture, stripy bathing tents, flapping flags, terraces cascading with flowers—in fact, all that ever went with *bains de mer*.

Nothing of this, here.

Margaret, wearing only her pearl string, ran down the virgin beach.

3

The kiss of the waves struck quite sharply against her; the untroubled water was much less warm than she had expected from the balmy air, the bright sunshine. She swam only a little distance out, fearing strange currents: fearing, too, something that inevitably turned up in all those desert-island books! The ominous black triangle above the blue water!

But Mr. Mount had said nothing about sharks. He had simply remarked: "Scream if you're drowned, won't you?" and had gone on whittling one of those half-finished wooden forks with his back to the bay.

As she ran back from her swim, she felt fitter than she remembered feeling. She didn't miss that wooden *curvette* of hot water for a bather's feet, which Deauville or Dinard considers a necessity of life. Again she went back to a childish habit, learnt when she bathed im-

promptu in some lonely spot. Taking a handful of dry fine sand she rubbed herself down with it.

A beach, a pool should suit a pretty girl as not even her prettiest frocks can do. Such a young Venus should have emerged from the foam of that exquisite lone shore! The build that Margaret then was looks well in a pen-and-ink comment by Hemjic on some coming fashion. But choir-boy-and-coffin-lid effects should not have come unto these yellow sands. "Really, I've got frightfully skinny," thought Margaret, glancing down at herself. "My legs are just bone. And my ribs! Not pretty. . . ."

Her first self-criticism! The first time she had considered her own shape except as that on which she showed off her clothes. Clothes and face—these were all of her appearance that she had cherished. Clothes! never have they been such a pre-occupation as now. Their lines, their movements, their petal textures, their tropic-bird tints, their significance, their transience have now a literature and an art to themselves. Good; provided the experts do not forget what it is that is more than raiment.

Margaret turned to the mirror on her chain, reflecting her small face—lovely, although its ivory pedestal had been allowed to wilt under modish disguises.

"Why should I worry though? Stuck here on this desert island until the next ship comes—" Straightening her back, she held her head up. Involuntarily she went through a few movements of long-neglected exercises. "Why should I care a hoot what I look like here?"

From behind the rocks she heard Mr. Mount's low-pitched humming as he worked:

“Oh, Mauricot, Mauricot—”
 (“Why did your mother
 Turn you out so handsome
 If she never meant you
 To please a sweetheart’s eye?”)

“When he goes up the cliff again I’ll wash my things out under that cascade. They’ll dry quickly in this sun. But I feel so fresh—I can’t put them on again as they are.” So, drawing rubber boots over stockingless feet—slipping on tweed skirt and blue Guernsey—here she was in the garments which were to be her island kit for days—for weeks! Grimier garments, rolled into a heap, she stowed under a rock crevice.

Then she turned—to ask her first favour of that man.

4

“Hullo, Miss Verity. Enjoyed your bathe?”

“Rather!”

This voice was new. In London her tired, listless enunciation (the syllables trailed behind her like ends of a dragging stole) had helped to put Mount off the “infernal girl.” Since the wreck the “wretched child” had chucked that drawl—in tones of real zest now she admitted enjoyment.

“Good. And look—” He held out the rude fork, three-pronged, roughly rounded at the base and sand-polished. Upon this Mount gazed with that passionate reverence of any amateur carpenter for any work, however rudimentary, of his own hand.

"How splendid!" admired Margaret sincerely. "Mr. Mount, I wanted to ask you—do you think you could make me something? A wooden comb?"

He frowned doubtfully.

"Couldn't you? My hair is so awful. All my hairpins have dropped out except two. And it's all matted. Does feel so horrible. What can I do about it?"

"M'm—"

"In those desert island books the people always comb their hair out with the backbone of a fish they've just eaten. Either their hairs must have been quite different from mine, or their fish backbones weren't like those trout ones; so I wondered if you could carve one out for me? Or—you haven't got a pocket comb with you, by any chance?"

"Should I look like this," demanded Mount bitterly, with a hand on his own golliwog head, "if I had? However, I'll see what I can do about hacking out a comb for you. Rather a rough effort, I'm afraid. As a matter of fact, I just found this bit of board here—"

"Washed ashore from the wreck of the 'Sweetheart II'?"

"Er—this."

He took up from the sand at his feet the flat fragment about three feet in length. "Might get something out of that. I'm afraid it would look rather like a hay-rake."

"But if I look like the hay!" She shook that brown tangle on her shoulders. "Anything is better than this. Will you lend me your knife for a few minutes first?"

"What for?"

"To cut my hair."

"You can't do that, Miss Verity. It can't be done."

"I can—"

"But you mustn't."

"I shall have to. It's short in front already. I must cut all those odious straggly bits at the back. Why, think! They've not been combed out for weeks and weeks and weeks—for however long I was on that yacht? How long was that?"

This he evaded. "You can't chop off your hair, you know. Think of the row there'd be—"

"Who from?"

"Why—"

"Mr. Mount, there's nobody here but you and those seagulls to see how my hair is done."

"Then why mind leaving it as it is?"

"Feels so beastly."

"But look here, the moment we get away from this dam—I mean, if we get taken off by a ship in time—"

"It would all have to be cut short at once before I could do anything with it," she argued, tugging at the sticky-feeling mass that seemed already like skeins of brown jumper silk after the kitten had finished with it. "Ages ago I'd have bobbed it, but for Cynthia thinking it would be more original and old-world to keep it long. Hideously uncomfortable it is now. I can't even tie it back. I do think you might lend me—"

"How do you imagine you'll manage if I do lend you my knife? Take up a bit at a time, I suppose, and saw through? I thought so. Well, if it's got to be done at all, you may as well let me do it properly."

When Margaret said, "Very well, will you, please?" it was not particularly meekly, but it was more meekly than she had ever before spoken to a young man.

She sat on the low red rock nearest to the flickering fire. Mount, short-sleeved and unkempt, bent over her with a grimly intent face; newly sharpened knife between his teeth. Breaking across his knee that piece of board, he fitted Margaret's long brown straggles neatly enough between the straight edges.

Memories came back to her of how she had been wont to get her hair "done." Softly furnished cubicle, sultry with the breath of pine shampoo, henna, hot curling irons, jasmine brilliantine. Obsequious enquiries from the coiffeur: "Are you perfectly comfortable like that, madam . . . might I ask you to lean just a trifle forward? . . . Any particular shampoo you would prefer? . . . Too hot, madam? . . . A dash of cold to finish? . . . Does that feel quite dry now? . . . Is that where you are accustomed to make the parting? . . . Would you care to have a manicure while I am dressing the hair? . . . Just a very slight wave?"

Actually she could have laughed at this contrast.

With that unique tool that had served as fish-cleaner and wood-carver, the man cut through the girl's thick jungle of hair, following the edge of the board. Once he tugged it badly. "Sorry, oh, sorry, Miss Verity." Finally he brought away boards and tangle together. "There!"

"Thanks." She shook her head like a mountain pony. Around her nape the brown crop twirled like an O-Cedar Mop.

“Jolly!”

“About twelve she looks now,” thought Mount. “What an infernal shame! All thanks to that old scoundrel, too. Sacrificing her hair. More comfortable, Miss Verity?”

“Rather,” she laughed, pulling out the inevitable mirror. “They couldn’t have done it better at Hill’s,” she declared childishly, picking up and putting together the hacked-off strands that seemed now like seaweed. “I wonder, Mr. Mount—”

“What do you wonder now?”

“Only how often I shall have to get you to be my hair-dresser again before we are rescued?”

“I wonder, too.”

“I’m sure it’s time something happened. In those books things are always happening. Packing-cases from the wreck—I do wish one of those would come ashore, with a brush and a comb in it, don’t you?”

“Yes, and with a razor and a stick of soap—” Poor young man! This was to be his deepest trial during the days that were to follow.

Sleeping in the open he enjoyed. Toiling like a navvy was a change. Being condemned to food as monotonous as the menu of a caged tiger—that did not mean as much to him as it might to some men. Boredom; the boredom of keeping to these set bounds: well! had not Mount been educated at an English public school on compulsory cricket? And if the object of this dreary game is not to render the youth of our nation immune against any further form of protracted ennui, what (a woman asks) can be its purpose? On our playing fields the British are trained to become the world’s colonists; what outpost of

Empire could seem, in comparison, dull? Months of eventlessness Mr. Mount could have borne—but without a shave . . . !

And to this he was condemned.

Day by day the outline of his firm, pleasantly moulded round chin was to become blurred by what our fathers describe as a “Newgate frill.” How he writhed under this detail—the one privation which “got” him—the girl could not realize. She got to know so well, however, the movement of his hand up to that young beard.

The day came when she thought: “Shall I say something about it? Shall I ask him if he would like to look at it in my little glass?”

She did not ask.

This was days later.

For days were going on and the amateur warder was still in charge of the deceived castaway, and still, still, there was no sign of other human life on that part of the island.

“Surely,” sighed the girl, “something must happen. In the ‘Admirable Crichton,’ it was that gunboat that landed. Surely something of that sort is *due* to happen soon?”

“It surely is, Miss Verity,” agreed the sorely-tired Mount.

They waited. . . .

The days went by towards the day of the sighting of that ship.

CHAPTER VIII

VOICE OF THE PAST

1

THE first forty-eight hours after the (so-called) wreck seemed long as a fortnight. So do all first days in unfamiliar places. Alike the first week of term or of holidays seems unending; afterwards they slip away.

Here, on the island (which, as far as Margaret was concerned, remained the Desert Island in the Pacific—for young Mount, held by his word, did not disillusion her)—here the days, lengthening into weeks, all slipped away. Mauve-and-silver evening succeeded blue-and-golden day swiftly as though a magician had waved it past with a wand.

No sooner was the breakfast caught (vainly had Margaret tried to learn his knack from the born poacher who could lure trout into his fingers, she, crouching behind his shoulder beside the brook could only watch his art), no sooner were the mussels collected and the savage delightful meal cooked and eaten, than there was the fire to see to. Then, behold, the sun was high in the blue, and it was time for her swim (she bathed at mid-day; he early). Then came Margaret's sun bath in her own creek, with exercises that she now ran through daily as she had been made to do as a little girl.

She did not yet realize that she enjoyed an existence stripped of all but the barest necessities of life—fire, water, food, rudimentary shelter and human companionship! Just as her appetite for food (long years in abeyance) was now a thrilling novelty, so was her appetite for other simple joys. Sun, physical energy, love of adventure were wakening in the girl who was—two Margarets. One was the Margaret of Hill Street, Ritz, Berkeley, Rolls, Reville's, Embassy, Bond Street, Oddleys . . . but the other Margaret, of Sussex cottage and garden—the sturdy girl-baby of whom young Verity had been so proud, the buoyant twelve-year-old to whom the Zoo was dissipation and whose first use for money was to buy presents for her mother—that child was after all not dead.

Out of the wreck she rose!

2

If it seems an unbelievably quick change from the handful of neurotic refuse into the healthy young animal that could again feel its life in every limb, then remember one thing:

We make our constitutions and our tendencies in our first ten years of life.

Those crucial years had seen Margaret into a supple tom-boy abounding in vitality and go. Nine subsequent years had overlaid, but had not smothered the healthy roots. Thriving shoots now put out to the fresh air and to the sunshine which Margaret thought so tropical.

Fortunately the weather held up all the time of what Margaret, quaintly enough, began to call "this holiday."

Call back to your minds the most primitive holiday you have ever enjoyed, in the most romantic, the wildest, the least civilized cranny of these our own islands. Always civilization has drawn its trail (and its cork) over everything. Somewhere civilization has stamped its armorial crest: the empty tin. Under the loveliest hedge you have found an old boot. The remotest cottage has spelt tea-things with a gilt shamrock at the bottom of the cup, washing-up, a lamp (always wanting filling), the problem of clean towels, when does the post come in? is that Wednesday's *Daily Mail*? and similar questions.

Not here. Not on Margaret's Island!

No letters, no bed-making, no dish-washing, no landlady whose poor husband always suffered with such shocking indigestion, no marketing, no forgetting to order the carrier's cart, no waiting for another consignment of bathing-costumes to arrive, nothing that is usually inseparable from life on holiday in "a little, unspoiled place by the sea. . . ."

Further, no holiday feuds. For, call back the merriest, most congenial party of which you yourself have ever made one. Always—or practically always—it has been complicated by the Others. They've wanted to play golf, or they've wanted to climb or they've wanted to stay at home and play bridge, or they have gone off together, or they have gone off alone, or they haven't got on, or they have "got off" . . . or they have been silent, talked too much, been always there, never turned up—everything at the wrong moment or in the wrong way . . . Always the Others; the marring, jarring Others.

The perfect holiday party consists of two—yourself

and the man (or girl) with whom at the moment you happen to be in sympathy.

Is it easy to arrange this in our present phase of civilization? Is it?

But something like it had been arranged for Margaret. The Others, the perpetual unmanageable Others, had dropped out of her ken and ceased to exist. Here, she found herself permanently with the one, the perfect companion.

(Still she was quite unconscious that she found him this.)

She did not think about it; she did not even think. Often she never even thought of her mother. As for her friendships, these belonged to the existence of another human being.

Sometimes, in lonely sunlight among calling gulls, she repeated, aloud, names: "Claude! Claude Oddley . . . Cynthia."

These meant nothing; seemed names of characters in a book read and half forgotten long ago.

3

"I wish we had something to read," Margaret said one day as they sat perched up on a ledge half-way up the cliff. It was a sort of natural cromlech or porch-shaped niche, sunny, warm, out of the wind—not that there was much wind. Anyhow, there they sat basking, looking towards the sea, the ever-moving, the blank. "Do you remember, Mr. Mount, the favourite discussion, 'If you

were to be cast on a desert island where you were allowed to take—' ”

“—‘two books, which two would you choose?’ ” smiled young Mount. “Yes, rather; well I know it. And the people who say at once ‘Shakespeare and the Bible’! And the purists who say: ‘The Bible isn’t a book, it’s a library.’ And the people who choose ‘Wisden and the Oxford Book of Verse’—and the others who say: ‘Mrs. Beeton’s Cookery Book and Paul Morant’s *Ouvert la Nuit*’—”

“And we’ve nothing,” concluded Margaret, not inconsolably. “Not even a bill. Nor a program of the music hall left in my coat pocket. Not even a letter to remind me what writing looks like—”

“Ha! That reminds me,” he exclaimed with a little laugh. “I’d forgotten. I have, Miss Verity.”

“Oh, what?”

“Letters. Quite a lot of letters I’ve got.”

“Here?” Startled, the large eyes gazed upon this young man with his shirt-sleeved back against the rocky wall; turned from him to the empty creek, to the lovely, lonely landscape.

“How could you possibly have *got* any letters—”

“Oh!” Mount was annoyed to realize he felt guilty . . . idiotic. Since he had made up his mind to go on living this fib doggedly until guard was relieved, he ought to be able to do it without feeling uncomfortable every time this wretched kid in his charge rubbed in her own deception. He explained shortly: “I only mean letters I had on me.”

“When we were wrecked?”

“Er—yes. I had put them aside before. Stuck them into a pocket here.” His hand went again to that invaluable webbing belt—bought, he had told her, from a sailor in Montevideo. “A packet of letters; ‘a voice,’ don’t you know, ‘out of the past.’”

“From the girl you are engaged to?” asked Margaret.

“Lord, no!” He laughed a little. “They are from a young woman, though. Not to me. They were to poor old Charles, my brother; handed over to me with our mother’s things. Would you care to look at them?”

“Do please show me.”

Together, on that milk-warm island afternoon when the sun blushed rosily golden on the olive grove at the top of their cliff, these companions studied that thin bundle of tinted note-paper, which Archie Mount took out of his belt. The paper was stamped with a golden oval enclosing a capital “M.” The handwriting upon them was childishly curly, for these were the six letters which “had greatly cheered” the last weeks of a young soldier’s life. Five of them began: “My dear Mr. Mount”; they ended: “Your affectionate friend, Margaret Verity.”

Archie Mount read the first letter aloud:

I promised to tell you about the Zoo and the Matinée which was perfectly lovely. Oh, how I enjoyed myself, you can’t think!!!! Do you like this note-paper? Isn’t it beautiful? I got it at Harrod’s because there was lots of money over from my cheque and so I was able to shop and I got some lovely handkerchiefs with V on for my mother and I thought it would be nice to get this special paper to write to you on as you said you liked getting letters. Some of it is pink and some pale-blue like an egg, and there is a mauve, which I

don't like very much. What is your favourite colour? The small Cats house was the most beastly thing you ever smelt, in fact it nearly made me sea-sick. Which is an awful feeling. Dear Mr. Mount you ought to have been in the parrot house, which I *did* so love. Have you ever heard the talking miner? My mother says it isn't spelt like that only she isn't quite sure either, so I must put it as it is pronounced. You will know what it is. When we were leaning over looking at the antelopes my tam o' shanter fell over into the den, wasn't it awful, but such a nice keeper went in after it and got it up. Poor fellow he was quite lame from the war, but he hopped about like anything. The scene I like best in Peter Pan was the Mermaid's rock which was *gorgeous!!!!* Them all diving in. Of course we couldn't stop to see the sea-lions fed because it was three o'clock. We had tea in the theatre. I *do* love teas in theatres, don't you? I should always have them. I suppose you have been to lots of theatres, I think it is ridiculous to be so excited you couldn't sleep, but you know this was my first and I *did* so adore it. Sitting quite close to us with their grown-ups there were two little boys one of them enjoyed nearly as much as I did, but the other was too young, all he said was when he saw the window that Peter Pan flies in at, showing the night sky outside was, "Is it dark? Is it dark in the street already because when we came in a minute ago it was bright daylight?" I thought it was awfully sad when Mrs. Darling thinks it is only the ghosts of her babies coming back, it made me think how awful for my own mummy if I died or anything horrid, and I quite choked. Wendy's little house in the trees was ripping. I forgot to tell you about the monkeys in the Zoo which have such pathetic eyes but I daresay they are quite happy really. I wonder if you are enjoying Switzerland. Please do write to me about winter sports and please give my kind regards to

Wallace. I am afraid I must end now as it is my bed-time, so with love and hoping you will soon be quite well, I remain
Your affectionate friend,

MARGARET VERITY.

In the short silence following a gull called. Mount looked up. The big-eyed oval face of his listener had changed.

"I say. Did you mind . . . perhaps I ought not to have—"

"Please do read another," begged Margaret, setting her soft mouth. "I was only thinking what a long time—no, not since we've been here. Before then. Such a long time since I had been to a theatre or any show alone with Mums. . . ." (This from the lips that had exclaimed: "Rubbish, Violet, you're not going to make me drop my friends! When I say a thing, I mean a thing.")

She said now: "I'd like you to read."

He went on to the next letter to his brother:

Thank you so awfully much for the picture post card of people ski-ing which must be so perfectly heavenly. It is so lovely having a friend abroad to write to who writes back. Only it made me quite sore envying you for being in the place and seeing all those things. And fancy there being some quite children, years and years younger than me. *How* I do wish I could go out there. I loathe England in the winter. I don't really but this is what I heard a lady say who came to tea. She was one of those awful Clergyman's wives quite new, the most eccentric one we have had. She wore such a large twisted gold brooch. I don't think it was real gold, and there were eight large rubies in it, I don't

think they were real rubies and there was a place for another one only there wasn't one there. Mother has just read this bit and says it is cruel and ill natured to make fun of people's dress and appearance and are we so perfect ourselves. So I won't, but dear Mr. Mount, you would have laughed so I had to describe her to you just a little. You said the gaming-room was stiff with freaks who ought to be at Mothers' Meetings so I thought how amused you would be at this one hoping you are nearly well now from your affectionate friend

MARGARET VERITY.

Another letter he read in his pleasantly modulated, reserved-sounding voice:

Dear Mr. Mount, How are you I hope quite well? Thank you so very much for your letter but do you mind writing in ink because the pencil was so very faint I couldn't quite read all the words and I asked my mother and there were some of them she couldn't either. She was quite upset because she couldn't. When I had to write in pencil to Daddy when I was quite a little girl my mother sometimes went over it in ink so that he should know what I had tried to put. We used to have to put c/o G. P. O. because we never knew where his ship might be. Last night I was awake all night nearly because there was thunder in the night and I am dreadfully afraid of thunder. I do try not to be because of being a sailor's daughter but there is generally one thing one is afraid of. I do so try but every time I hear that rumbling I can't help it I would rather have tigers in my room so I went into my mother's bed. This is a very short measly letter and please excuse the blot as we are in the middle of making toffee for the Sale of Work. It is being got up by the lady with the not all there ruby brooch. You remember I told you

that when you get to know her she is rather decent. Your affectionate friend,

MARGARET.

Here Mr. Mount cleared his throat.

"Read the others yourself, will you, Miss Verity?"

"Aloud?"

"Er—no, if you don't mind. I think I'm going to get another swim while it is so warm."

He left her sitting there, bright-eyed, to read the letter that had been at the bottom of the packet:

"MY DEAR CHARLES,

"It feels awfully queer to be putting Christian names to grown-ups and rather cheek, you are the only grown-up I have ever Christian named, but as it said in your last letter can't you call me anything but Mr. Mount just for once, I will, and if you don't like it you can just hastily say and I will put Mr. Mount in all my other letters which I write. Please will you thank Wallace for writing the letter that you dictated because you had sprained your hand. He writes beautifully so clear much more easy to read than yours really if you don't mind. It will now soon be spring and all the thousands of little boys who come to Lewes to go back to prep. schools for the Easter term were simply crowding the train yesterday when Mums and I were there. Do you remember the last time we were at that station was on that wonderful day when we saw the Zoo and you and Peter Pan and everything, such a lot of things always happening at once? Do you know Mr. Mount (crossed out) Do you know Charles, we heard the most *awful* scene happened to-day at Victoria station. One of the School trains started before anybody

knew it had, two minutes before the time or something and there were a lot of the mothers in the carriages arranging the luggage on the rack and a lot of boys outside reading the rainbow and looking at new boys and that sort of thing and quite calmly without a whistle or a green flag or anything the train started before they could get out carrying all the boys' mothers non stop to Lewes. Wasn't it awful for them and leaving lots of their boys all loose on the platform. They had to come on by the 5.15. There were two brothers, and one boy was taken and the other left. Like in the Bible only he had tea at Rumplemayers with one of the mothers of a boy he knew so he didn't mind. I don't think there is any more news except that the snow is melting away from the snowdrops in our garden. I will enclose you two snowdrops for you to put in your button hole. I don't think more will go for threepence it is a long way to Switzerland so I hope they will not arrive withered, but if they do just put them in a saucer of warm water with a little salt and they will revive. Good night, dear Charles, with love from

“MARGARET.”

This had been the child's last letter to her friend abroad.

The date on the postmark showed that it had arrived at that Swiss sanatorium just two days before Charles Mount had gone on to where no letters more would reach him.

Letters of an impulsive, affectionate, unclever, unspoilt bud—Margaret!

To her, now reading them, it seemed as if she had come such an endless journey; she looked back on a nature so

different! Touched, stung, she thought: "How horrid I have got! I was going to have been so nice to Mums and everybody. . . . How different one grows up."

But Mount, springing down into his own creek, was thinking: "Uncommonly like that still! . . . At the bottom of her heart, she's just that same kid. . . ."

CHAPTER IX

ROMANCE AND REALITY

1

I KNOW what my readers must think who have read so far of this story.

You sum it up in the word—"Inevitable!"

You think: "Here are two people, normal, young, good-looking, thrown together on this island beach—whether it's really a desert island or not doesn't matter at all! The young woman still fondly imagines it is, and the young man has to play up. You can see that by now he's practically played himself into his rôle. Doesn't mind it either. Likes the job. Sunset, midday heat, cool of lovely gloaming finds them always together. Here's the girl blooming out into fresh good looks every day. What else can you expect?"

Personally, I take young Mount's word for it that although he had left off resenting the "infernal girl," although he was intrigued, delighted over the swift changes of body and mind already wrought in her—although he found her touchingly plucky, pleasant, good-humoured, companionable—all this was still *liking*; no more.

But it was coming, you think?

"Inevitable!" you repeat?

Fated, that this young girl emerging into physical health and vitality should begin to attach herself to this

young man, personable even if he were dressed like a deck-hand on a tramp steamer, wore hair like any Café Royal poet and a beard . . . who shall say how many days old?

Why beat about this bush (not his beard, but the situation)?

If after these days of real primitive companionship they were not yet in love—it must have been growing obvious that man or girl or both must soon become in love. You really think it is as obvious and simple as all that?

You still insist—"inevitable"?

Ah, but wait—

Please come back and listen to a conversation on this very same subject.

2

This had been some time before. A day before the abduction—I mean, the benevolent removal of Margaret. It was in Nice; I had gone for a walk in the country above that toyish town with young Mr. Mount.

Those who think it easy to draw out the confidence of that modern young have not met his type! It's he who "draws out."

At my first tentative words upon the coming island adventure, he turned upon me his gentlest smile and the reply: "Matchmaking?"

"Ah, you know you are," he persisted to my denial. "*You* think: 'Here will be these two in ideal surroundings; the girl at least imagining that she has been swept away for keeps.' You think that young man, once she is right

away from civilization, will represent Romance. You think—”

“Mr. Mount, you seem curiously sure of my thoughts!”

“I am so sorry. If I am boring you we will change the subject—”

“We will do nothing of the kind. I want to hear what you do think.”

“On your head be it. I think you consider that I am dead certain to fall desperately in love with this young lady because, ‘with any luck for Mr. Lloyd’s plan, I shall watch her change, under my eyes, from a spoilt wreck back again into a natural human being.’ You expect that vanity will come into it, because I shall have my share in the change. You add propinquity, sea air, moonlight solitude, waves on the shore. You don’t see how anything else can happen but that the end of the adventure should leave me engaged to Miss Verity—”

I countered: “You do not even leave me the knowledge that you yourself are already engaged.” (He was, you remember.)

“Matchmakers don’t think that matters. You tell yourself, ‘Well, engagement isn’t marriage anyhow.’ It’s a time of probation only. Nowadays the modern young think no more of getting engaged than of drawing the girl as a partner in the mixed doubles! And, besides, you’ve ‘never seen this girl young Mount’s engaged to,’ ” continued young Mount, deadly mild. “‘Perhaps it was one of those boy-and-girl entanglements that come unravelled at the first touch of reality—’ ”

“*Was* it a boy and girl entanglement?”

"Ah, that interests you!" exclaimed this disconcerting youth, who, the more he said, showed himself the more deeply reserved. If he talked it must be of other people, not of himself. Never of himself! "*You*," he accused me, "read serials. Bound to come out like that in any serial. There will be a fascinating new instalment."

"You are unfair. You're one of these people who cannot give offence; you know it and trade on it. A serial, indeed. What do you mean?"

"For synopsis of previous chapters, see page eight," insisted Mr. Mount, smiling prettily down upon me. "But as this is not a romantic serial, shall I tell you the reality—shall I tell you what is likely to happen?"

"Pray do."

"In real life, Miss Verity will come back from her adventure as her uncle intends: a different girl. Fit, jolly and in great looks. She'll take up her old life—oh, no, not life as before. Not that treadmill of indoor artificialities. She'll have learnt how to look after herself. She'll have learnt how to enjoy herself. She'll chuck-over doing it. She'll chuck the wrong people. So far it will tally . . . but, here's where the programme alters—"

"How?"

"Well, she *won't* have learnt to look upon me as the one man in the world for her. That is tradition. It does not happen. It won't. I am sorry to crash your romance—"

"Serial," I murmured. "But since you know so much, Mr. Mount, may I beg you to tell me what will happen? Who will become Margaret's romance?"

"Young Oddley, perhaps."

"Claude? That marionette with waterworks inside? It's to save her from Claude and Cynthia that the crazy scheme is evolved. Do you imagine that after a girl had been humanized she would still contemplate a Claude?"

"Claude isn't so bad," protested Mr. Mount. "Isn't real love and that supposed to make a man of a fellow?"

"I hate you," I told him. "How thankful I am you were not there when I was a girl. . . . At least Claude is less likely to happen to her than you are."

"Plenty of men to happen to a girl like that. Where there were dozens before, there will be scores after the cure. And, by Jove!—I have thought of the very man for her! That red-haired youngster, who brought her the Peke. Charming fellow, that."

"Eric? That undergraduate? Who can't even talk English? Who has never heard of anything that happened before nineteen-nineteen? You will expect Margaret to take seriously a boy like that?"

"A nice boy," pronounced Mr. Mount, with his baffling, nonchalant reserve. "A girl might do a lot worse than young Eric. But in any case he is a good deal more like what you can *expect* to happen. . . ."

We turned back towards déjeuner.

3

But to return to things after time had begun to speed up on that island.

Once, Margaret said: "Mr. Mount, we seem to have been marooned here for months! Yet in another way it seems only hours; seems only a minute ago since we

watched that glorious red sunset last night. And now look! the sun is beginning to go down again."

Yes, quickly the golden day had gone. . . .

Once, just after he had said "good night," young Mount found himself opening his mouth to remark: "We're always saying 'Good night' in this blessed place."

Afterwards he couldn't imagine why he hadn't said it.

It would have made Margaret laugh. She laughed often now. So much more intensely was she living in every nerve; yet so much more restfully! Continually she was doing something that used up what had been an inert, ailing young body; so that at night she sank into black-velvet unconsciousness and slept the stars round, slept the sun up.

By day she worked and ran about; she stacked up wood, she made grottos like a child, starting a shell collection, too. She experimentalized with the island's aromatic herbs. She improved her diving. She raced Mr. Mount, this adopted brother, from rock to rock on the sands. She made naïve ornaments with seabirds' plumage, berries threaded on a cut-off, smoothed-out strand of her own hair. Tiny trifles like that delighted her. All the while she felt life pulse by in a rhythmic monotone of well-being. Nothing would happen . . . never mind.

Then, when she had thus resigned herself, something happened.

CHAPTER X

LONG DISTANCE CALL

1

IT happened when she was alone on the beach.

Mr. Mount had gone up-cliff, ostensibly to hack boughs from the eucalyptus—actually, I must tell you, with his usual forlorn hope of waylaying Mr. Lloyd. . . .

To think that the old scoundrel might all the time be almost within a stone's throw of his niece and her reluctant warder! . . . It was rather *much*. . . .

Meanwhile Margaret (who had been of all girls the most chaotically untidy about her room, and who now had become curiously orderly regarding the caves and the shore), had finished pottering “tidying” in the creek. Here always, now, the fuel-piles were neatly stacked; always the fish-bones buried. No litter of leaves or twigs was allowed. She had made a rude hearth with flat stones arranged in a semicircle about the bonfire. Now she was sweeping it with a broom she had made herself. This was new. She had collected those twigs of a size, had herself stripped them of leaves and bound them together, had selected a straight bit of branch handle. Quite a creditable garden-broom it made. He had not seen it. She raised her eyes towards the slope down which he would appear. No sign yet of the big, dishevelled, graceful figure.

Casually and fleetingly her glance turned to the bay—and there she saw “It”—

The traditional smudge on the horizon. . . .

The steamer showed black on the blue, with a tiny grey feather of smoke trailing away from it. Yes, a steamer proceeding rapidly towards the North! . . . Seen from where Margaret stood she looked perhaps as long as the girl’s own forefinger.

“A big ship,” gasped Margaret aloud. “A ship come to take us off the island!”

This was all according to schedule in the desert island books.

The castaway, trembling with excitement, swayed first backwards then forwards—

She rather lost her head. Book castaways retain theirs with such ease! Margaret Verity did not.

She gasped, swayed about, for quite three seconds. She ejaculated: “Now, why isn’t Mr. Mount here? Why has he got to be up the cliff?” The next thought that tumbled through her brain was: “*Why* haven’t we got a great beacon blazing for the people on the ship to see? Always he put it off. . . .” Next: “They won’t see the bon-fire!” Next: “I shall have to wave something. I shall have to wave something.” The memory came of castaways tearing shirts to use as flags. . . .

She ran into her own cave; rushed up to those crevices in the rocks; dragged out the French tricot frock, ruined for ever now by the Cascade Laundry. Black monkeys had “run” all over it; it was of every shape and several lengths. As frock, it was a dingy, grey unsucces; but at least it would do as flag.

She tied its sleeves to the straight ilex branch which young Mount used to stir up his bonfire. She tied it, flag-fashion. She raised the bough; thought hastily: "No, no! that won't do—that certainly won't do—I shall have to be high up somewhere—"

Clutching the flag, she made her way blindly up the cliff. She scrambled on to a high red boulder, dragging her impromptu banner.

There, frantically, she waved and waved; called "Ship *ahoy!*" but her voice failed in her throat. Higher above her head she flapped her flag. Her eyes fixed themselves desperately on the horizon, "*willing*" whoever was on that steamer to signal a response. She could not tell me how far away that vessel must have been; two—three miles? From that distance, surely, whoever was keeping a lookout must have seen the frantically waving patch of white against red!

"A-*hoy*—"

Too far off to hear; they must *see*? They would see directly. . . .

Imagine the vehemently excited waif, calling, waving, *willing* that vessel. That vessel meant help, human beings, her mother, home, civilization, comforts, getting away from this desolate solitary rock of a place—

2

An irrelevant thought leapt up somewhere not in Margaret's mind at all; from further than that smoke-drawn spiral:

"I don't want to get away from here! Wish I needn't.

I shall come back. Some day I shall have to come back to where I've been so happy—”

3

That mad little thought flashed off.

Once more, to get away—to get away was the girl's one urge. She bit her lips; ground her feet into that rock. Oh, they *must* see her from the boat; They must! (“Help!”) If she could only scream louder, wave more frenziedly—

In her own ears she heard her angry voice demanding: “Where is he? Why doesn't *he* come and stop that ship?”

4

Mr. Mount at that moment was less than a quarter of a mile up the bush-grown hillside. He had left the grove, he was just turning away from his favourite winding of the brook. Through the gills of four of the finest trout (that biggest fellow must be well over a pound) that he had yet caught, he had hooked a supple twig. Swinging his catch he started for “home.”

Curious, he did already in his mind think of that creek by this word.

Then he thought: “All very fine and large, but how much longer *can* the state of affairs last? That old liar must have set some time limit, dash it all, for his unspeakable arrangement. How is his niece going to take it when the end does come? Can only be a matter of another day

or so," Archie Mount told himself (as he had told himself daily since the beginning). "The old dodderer will have to appear; make a clean breast of it to the girl—"

And then, what?

By Jove! she'd be angry! . . . Infuriated she would be. True, the little thing had turned up trumps in this God-forsaken spot and had actually (from being a mere "mess") proved herself a sportswoman. But the most sporting girl in the world would be made angry with perpetrators of—there wasn't a polite word for this scheme.

Margaret Verity on the boat had stormed over being taken willy-nilly on a mere sea-trip. What about the sequel to it?

More, what would the girl say to him, Mount? At this moment there assailed his ears the sound of the girl's voice calling shrilly some way down the cliff below, calling frenziedly: "Help! Help!"

5

For that steamer in the bay was making her way—perfectly unheeding!—away from the island.

Ever more vehemently the castaway girl flapped and signalled. Useless. Whoever was on the boat had apparently no thought of replying to those frantic signals from the shore.

(If you come to think of it, why on earth should they?)

Fruitless, her efforts. She could wave herself into exhaustion: she could shout herself speechless. Smaller,

smaller grew the shape of that steamer on the blue; longer, longer that plume of smoke thinning out across the sky.

"Too far away," thought Margaret, anguished. "Nobody on the bridge to keep a lookout. . . . Going. . . . Leaving us here. . . . What shall I do!" (Last efforts with the flag.) "Ahoy! Help! HELP!"

"Hullo," a voice shouted back, sharply concerned, from above her. "Hullo, what's up? What is it, I say? What's the matter, Margaret?"

Margaret turned to this man crashing through the scrub; dropping, as she did so, that pathetic futile frock-banner.

"Ship," she sighed huskily in a voice with all heart gone from it. "Look! Over there to the right . . . almost out of sight now."

Young Mount for the first time really snapped at her: "Is *that* all?"

"All?" she repeated, gazing after that speck of black upon boundless blue. "She's gone. . . ."

"I thought you had been bitten by a snake. I certainly thought you had been bitten by a snake at least. For Heaven's sake don't go giving me another fright like that!"

"Give you a fright? Is that all you say when—"

"You gave me a most infernal fright. . . . Please don't do it again, if you *don't* mind," with that italicized politeness which is more alarming than any violence. "Hearing you shout out like that, I thought—I believe there are scorpions—"

"Can't you talk about anything but *that*? Haven't you any imagination? Look! Think! Our only chance! Gone from us! . . . Can't you realize?"

Mount threw her a look. Not realize? He was within an inch of blurting out to her what it was that *she* did not realize. Then and there, as the couple began to make their way down, he (dangling trout and scarcely knowing what they were) all but began to tell the girl exactly why it had been unlikely that any passing boat should feel called upon to take the faintest notice of her, waved she never so frantically. (What earthly difference could have been made, had there waved from the cliffs an entire Ballet of Castaway Girls?)

"I thought that at last the boat had come. . . . I thought that now we were saved. They never *saw* me, Mr. Mount."

"Can't be helped," retorted Mount gloomily.

The temptation had passed. He would not break his word, give this show away. He resigned himself to another day, say, of keeping up this farce. After all the person with whom he was wroth was not here. Rather a shame to visit indignation upon the girl, the whole thing being even rougher on her. Consolingly he added: "Don't look so heartbroken, Miss Verity (not aware that just before and for the first time he had used her other name); 'better luck next time. There'll be another along, I dare say—"

"You talk as if we were in a London Tube station," protested Margaret unsteadily. "You talk as if a train had just 'passed this station,' instead of our having just

missed the only hope of getting away from a desert island!"

Young Mount, striding down the slope beside her, replied: "Look here, I apologize. It isn't my fault. Believe me. Believe me that I am sorry! For everything!"

Sincerity vibrated in his tone. The last words (which Margaret thought applied to the present incident only) touched her. She looked up at him with sweet and candid eyes of a child, and replied: "Of course, it's not your fault. Why do you say *you* are sorry? It's quite all right—"

Impulsively she put out to him the hand nearest to him. Shifting those fish into his left, he took the girl's hand. Hand-in-hand they reached the beach.

At that moment there assailed Margaret a curious wonder— When had he held her hand before? Suddenly the memory swept back.

Lifting her hand, still clasped in his (he had been helping the girl down from that last boulder: quite natural after all, that he should!) she looked up at him, her eyes wide. "Ah! it was, then?— It was you?"

"What was?"

"It was *you*," Margaret said, "who held my hand that night?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You did . . . You held my hand that night when we were wrecked . . . when we were in the boat coming here. Didn't you, Mr. Mount?"

Pause.

Mr. Mount: "Why do you ask me that?"

"It was you who held it?"

"Yes. . . . But, I say, why did you ask me?"

Another pause.

6

Quite involuntarily Margaret had asked that question. Several times she had puzzled over the landing on the island.

Of course there had been the boat. . . . Well, where *was* the boat?

Knocked to pieces on the rocks, she assumed. Yes, she had assumed (when she had spoken of it at odd times) that the boat had been dashed to pieces, reduced to matchwood—that all that (apparently) remained of the boat was that one plank which, washed up on the shore, Mr. Mount had broken in two, and had used when he was bobbing her hair. (He was also trying to carve out of it some sort of a comb for her.)

But somebody would have to have rowed that boat—

You can't row and hold another person's hand—

Also, if there had been only Mr. Mount, in the boat—

Or had there been somebody else?

Easy, you think? for Margaret to have asked these questions of the young man then and there. . . .

No.

It was not easy for her to ask. She was all too troubled. Preoccupied. . . .

At this moment Margaret herself did know what was beginning to occupy her.

Much she cared (basically) about that boat question. The boat, the storm, the wreck—those were surface rip-

ples on the deep. Deep down, she was astoundingly interested in this question of the touch of another person's hand. (It can be a vital thing enough!)

Curious, if you go back to the scene when she had lolled among her brocade cushions, with her lax fingers held, no, left in the hand of young Lord Oddley; left, just as negligently as she would have left them in the bowl of warm, lemon-scented lotion brought by the black-satin expert who asked: "Do you wish the ends cut round or pointed, madam?" So many, many times Margaret had given up her hand to Claude Oddley: never once had the touch even of his lips upon it meant more to her than the gesture of her manicurist! Had it been in the dark, she would have known no difference in the handclasp of any one of her bodyguard.

Only Mr. Mount's had been different. His had been so—magnetic; comforting—what else could she call it? Words failed her. Having once recognized his touch, she knew that she would in future always know it again. Strange little revelation! It had been pleasant to her; quite suddenly she had been made to feel that she *liked* him to hold her hand.

(This, naturally, was the instant when she took it away from him and dropped it, with fingers that opened and shut, once, against the rough fold of her skirt.)

She'd liked it!

As she could not explain this to herself, how, possibly, could she explain it to the man? She could not speak about it. She could not frankly answer his: "Why do you ask me?"

Offhandedly she said: "I wondered. I was half asleep

all the time in the boat. I just wondered if I'd dreamt it—" Then as if with renewed interest: "What *is* the time?"

"Between six and seven. Just seven."

7

From that hour the note of their life changed. That rhythmic monotone of well-being broke—into disharmonies.

The very next morning sounded several of these.

CHAPTER XI

CHANGE HERE

1

THAT morning, for the first time since the sick puppy incident, Mr. Mount spoke to Margaret almost formally. Not stiffly; no, she could not have accused him of that. Still! something had left his manner. Something that had made all the difference had now gone out of his voice. It wasn't only what he said. . . .

What he said was: "I say—should you mind if we finish only half these trout for our breakfast to-day, and put the others aside for our evening meal? And do you mind if we feed rather later to-night? And, if you wouldn't mind, I shall have to ask you to keep to this creek until I see you, Miss Verity. I shall have to put you on, as it were, on parole, while I am away all day."

Surprised, Margaret looked up from cleaning the fish (which hideous fatigue she now achieved without turning a hair).

"Away?"

"Yes. I really ought to look at the interior of this—this place. Do you know, all these days I have hardly been more than a couple of miles inland, ever? I might bring back—some sort of something," said Mount.

He stood there, looking the typical, the combless, the razorless castaway. Their sole toilet implements (till he should have finished hacking out that comb) were those sticks of eucalyptus, with ends frayed into tassels, which they used Boy Scout fashion, as toothbrushes. Clean as the sea breeze were these two people. (Cleaner, from the freshness of air, sea, exercise, than is the most fastidious town-dwelling frequenter of Turkish baths, who spends substance on crystals and creams.) But, also, they were shaggy as the mountain heath. Mr. Mount's moustache and beard had "come fair" to match his blue eyes, instead of black to match his hair, brows and lashes. Oddly compelling, these "two-coloured" men. With that colouring, with his wonderful figure, tousled locks and sandy, dishevelled clothes, Mr. Mount looked an Adonis—according to Augustus John. Margaret, not even as tidy as the Lovely Savage, but bonnier through her ragamuffin attire than she had shown in any of her French frocks, looked up at him. As she did so, there flashed back to her a tiny scene out of a previous existence. This same young man, looking a complete Denis Bradley advertisement for men's evening dress, perfect in outline, perfectly polished, turning upon her a ballroom smile:

"I am so sorry, Miss Verity, I haven't had the chance to dance with you; and now we have to go."

Miss Verity: "Oh, well, that's your loss, isn't it?" Shades of the Berkeley! Had that ever happened?

Again the island grew back around her . . . again this man's doings became paramount. He was suggesting going away for the entire day!

Injured she asked: "Aren't I coming with you?"

"Who would see to the bonfire?"

"It has never gone out yet—"

"It has never been left so long."

"Couldn't we damp it down? It goes on smouldering underneath for hours. I remember once at home, in the garden, our leaf bonfire was alight for two whole days without our doing anything to it, Mr. Mount. We just left it—"

"You probably weren't dependent upon it, then, for all the warmth and cookery you had."

"Well! If this fire did go out, we could light it again. We've got matches? You have a whole box of matches left?"

"Imagine wasting a match. . . . Where do you suppose our next box of matches will come from?"

"I don't know," answered Margaret coldly—indeed, very coldly. She found her adopted brother detestable this morning. She found him touchy, bad-tempered, even quarrelsome. All friendliness had left his tone; he looked at her, too, as if he wished to goodness he were the only castaway there.

Around them smiled sands, bay, skies. Further and further they seemed to grow apart. With such a suddenness, too; and for no reason that Margaret could see. It was as if something had happened since they had said "Good night—"

"The fire," remarked Mount distantly, "might not be too easy to relight. Supposing it came on to rain, with our fire dead out? Just because it's been fine so far—You hadn't thought of—of one of these tropical thunderstorms that might come on?"

Swiftly Margaret's small face altered from sulks to panic.

"You won't *leave* me, will you, if there's going to be thunder? Anything else I shan't mind. . . . Even storms at sea I don't mind as long as it doesn't thunder as well. . . . I'd—I'd much rather have wild animals—or savages—"

"Well, I don't think you need be afraid of meeting either wild animals or savages, here. It's not the kind of place for anything much bigger than a fox; and—er—I've not struck any footmarks but our own, Miss Verity."

"I know that. I told you I was not afraid. It was only when you said about— You don't really think it will thunder to-day, do you?"

"Doesn't look like it," returned Mount dryly, glancing up into the cloudless blue across which gulls drew white Vs this way and that. "Marvellous weather. No sign of breaking at present, either. You're not really nervous of being left, are you?"

"I'm not nervous of anything *else*," explained Margaret. "I like being alone. I prefer it."

That taste was gratified during the rest of the blue-and-golden day.

2

Yet she could not keep her thoughts off her customary companion; usually so "pally," so easy to get on with. What a beast he had been this morning! In what a hateful way he had said "Good-bye" before he swung up the

cliff following the course of that giggling, hillside brook which was their only larder.

“Good-bye” indeed! So politely. . . .

(Beast!)

As she made ready for her bathe, Margaret remembered how in a previous existence she had once told somebody that she could not bear Uncle Tom’s “young friend Mount.” Horrid manners he had got!

“So he has,” she told herself, as she dragged the Guernsey over her cropped head and flung her tweed skirt from her. “Perfectly horrid manners!”

She found herself considering, thinking over every one of them. How charming he could be! How delightful he had been! How kind, that first day, when she had been so stiff and sore and overtired! How sympathetic! Friendly, too, about her childish letters. Always so “nice,” even if so reserved. . . .

For reserved he always was.

Although he had talked to Margaret by the hour; although—dabbling in the brook or whittling wood or striding through scrub at her side—he had told her plots of whole books he had read; although he had described to her entire plays that he had seen; although he had conveyed to her life in countries she had never visited—even life in his own destroyer during the war—Mr. Mount, though brotherly, had still remained inviolably *reserved*. Not a single personal thing about himself had he ever told her. No, not once since they had been flung on this desert island together. Would he, ever? Margaret wondered.

She went over countless other things about which he

had talked to her. She knew every intonation of his voice, talking: His "Ah!" His "I say, Miss Verity—" His friendly "Don't be silly!" She recalled the smile in his blue eyes. The lights on the top of his black head in sunshine. The outline of his profile. His graceful small-headed, wide-shouldered silhouette moving darkly against flames, at night. All these details she had noticed just because he was the only person there. Odious of him to give her something unpleasant to remember the first time that he had left her to herself ("Imagine wasting a match." Bad-tempered brute!)

Odious of him, too, not to take her with him on this his first inland expedition. She was sick of this bit of shore. She had been longing to explore whatever lay behind those further rocks, that grove, that sweep of desolate country.

And he—making thin excuses!—had left her. . . . Talking about "marvellous weather" as if it were at the theatrical garden party. . . . Pah!

Only after her swim (he had taken her promise never to go out of her depth during his absence from the shore), only after her swim, rub-down, jerks and sweep-round with the broom, did Margaret begin to feel less ruffled.

Presently, she felt delighted. . . .

3

This was when she found what Mount had left behind him. Left, forgotten, carelessly left! On the rock close to the basin of the cascade— Two priceless treasures. One was the matches—the box of matches.

"How splendid!" exulted Margaret like a schoolgirl.

“He, of all people! Always ragging me for forgetting where I put down the fork! Scolding me for mislaying the knife! He can never say a word to me again. My turn to rag him for carelessness. . . . Shall I let the fire out?” she thought, mischievously.

“I’ll scatter it a bit, and then I’ll let it out. Then, when he thinks he’s lost the matches—” she dropped the precious box, as a small boy stows away valuables, inside the front of her jersey, which she now wore belted with the strap of Mount’s motoring-coat. With zest she gave herself up to anticipations of the scene there would be. In the briefest space of time she lived through it. In fact, she had but moved her head again before she caught sight of the second treasure that Mr. Mount had dropped, left, forgotten.

His watch.

How too good! What possessed him to be so different from his usual careful self this morning?

Margaret took up the watch, an old-fashioned, graceful gold thing that (as he had told her) had been his mother’s, with the slender gold chain on which he, too, wore it. Chain and watch were always attached to his broad belt. Always he kept that watch in a belt pocket, the end of the chain fastening into another pocket so that it never left him.

But now! Now, *he* had left it!

Margaret felt quite kindly towards him; forgetting his manners, his quarrelsomeness, thinking only of how she would rag him and how he had deserved it . . . Suddenly she noticed what was set in that back of that small watch.

A tiny portrait, of course. Naturally, a miniature. That of a quite young, dark-eyed girl. Obviously, Margaret, looking at it, realized instantly that this must be the girl to whom Mr. Mount was engaged.

Shortly afterwards pain stabbed her.

This surprised her so much that at first she could not place what it was that she had felt. Then, unmistakably, she felt it again. Pain. A mental pain that was nearly physical. Stab at the heart; lump in the throat. . . .

She, who had thought—"I can never be unhappy on this island." Unhappiness was now invading her!

She stood for a moment, frowning. Then she let herself down on sun-warmed pebbles and sat, knees drawn up to her chin, brooding. A new dull ache of misery filled her.

Much later on she explained to herself that it was because she was so sorry to think of Mr. Mount separated from that girl in the watch.

"Of course the girl imagines that he is drowned and that she will never see him again. Terrible for her. And for him, too, of course. That's what's made him so bad-tempered; fretting because he doesn't know how long it may be before he sees her again . . . if he does see her."

Honestly Margaret did not guess the meaning of that stab, that lump in the throat, that dull, that gnawing ache. At the first hint of that primitive lurker in her heart she was saddened, startled. . . .

An hour later she was restlessly pacing to and fro, (barefooted, for her rubber shoes showed signs of wearing through. She kept these for scaling the cliff). Up

and down she paced, beside that damped-down fire on the beach. With unrecognized defences she damped down that other fire which was about to kindle within her.

"Another ship is sure to come," she told herself.

Regret and jealousy smouldered . . . smothered. . . . When she put the watch carefully among her own trinkets upon the chain in her rock crevice, she thought she would give it to Mr. Mount as soon as he missed it; but a moment later she took the watch up again—drew the match-box out of its hiding place, and then carefully and ostentatiously she put out both these things on the boulder where he always sat. She waited for him. . . .

She thought: "Where can he have gone? What can he have found? Where is he?"

4

He was at that moment waiting, fuming! Waiting, in a tiny village post-office high set above the snow-line of that island. Snow-padded the road outside and the edges of a brook piercingly crystal, clearer, more sharply pure than the cliff-cascade. Snow, dazzlingly blue-white, mantled the jigsaw mountains far beyond; near at hand it furred the hedges of arbutus, the ferns, the light green blossoms of the wild Christmas rose that grew so determinedly all about that savage hamlet, so remote . . . so cold . . .

Stifling stuffiness inside the little bureau made Mount cough as he waited for the answer to his telephone message, to his frantic wires, to his struggles to get through in any way to the town.

“It lasts!” remarked the Madonna-faced postmistress, black-shawled, blue-aproned, behind the lattice. “It lasts.”

Far down on the coast, out of the snow range, in the belt of warm sunshine, Margaret, too, waited and waited and waited, finding “it lasts”; so that to-day seemed the very longest she had ever passed on the island.

She muttered, huskily: “What can be keeping him?”

CHAPTER XII

TWANG AT THE STRINGS

1

AT sunset Mr. Mount returned—with a surprise. It was a hamper, roped about with well-worn cord. Bumping, tugging it, pulling it behind him by this cord, he brought it up with the remark: “Something towards the housekeeping, Miss Verity” (uttered with enormous brightness).

Swiftly Margaret thought: “He’s *still* as cross as two sticks.”

He was.

“Not without reason, either; since after his hours of waiting and to all his frantic appeals he had received only the barest, baldest, unsatisfactory reply left by Mr. Lloyd at the hotel in that town—the hotel where he had at last located that old criminal. The reply had run in two languages: “Carry on for the present. Am communicating.”

After which, what was there to do to fling himself upon the charity of the village priest and of the village post-mistress, who also kept the only village shop?

“You’ve found something. You’ve actually found some wreckage!” exclaimed Margaret, thereby relieving Mount of the necessity of extra fibbing. During his trail back across country he had savagely put together the legend of finding the hamper, caught in a cleft of rock in a bay to the right. Now he needn’t use it.

"Do, do let's see what the things are," begged Margaret, falling upon the hamper, tearing with her fingers at the rigid, complicated knot. . . .

Margaret and Mount, with an intensity which they would not have shown in old days over the whole of Fortnum and Mason's unpacked the tightly-wedged stores. They comprised such varying items as a large tin of Petit Beurre biscuits, a dozen apples, tongue in a glass, dried sausage, boxes of French matches, cigarettes, a flash of orange curaçao, more chocolate, a cake of soap (eagerly seized by Margaret), a second large knife, and, finally, something in an old leather case.

"Mr. Mount, what is this extraordinary thing?"

"You may well ask," retorted Mr. Mount, looking foolish. He did not know why he had been such an idiot. He had stood out against offers from that benevolent old padre of things he really needed, such as scissors and a safety razor. With an immense effort of will he had refused these necessities of life, knowing that he must to the last moment keep up the desert island racket to the girl, helped by every desert island detail. And yet—yet he hadn't been able to stand out against the offer of something worse than useless. . . .

Inwardly rating himself, he said: "Why, whoever packed up the hamper should have loaded it up with this fool thing—"

"But what is it?"

"Of all things in the world, it's a ukulele."

"Oh, but how lovely! Can you play it, Mr. Mount?"

"After a fashion. But—taking up valuable room with a fool musical instrument, instead of something useful—"

So disproportionately annoyed he seemed, that Margaret did not even introduce the subject of forgotten matches and left-about watches.

She let the young man find them. He put them away without a word said. Possibly he imagined that Margaret never saw them.

2

For the first time since the wreck there was more than fish, mussels, herbs and cascade water for supper. What a windfall. . . . The two young people munched biscuits between which were wedges of hacked-off tongue, they nibbled apples, sweet and juicy. Out of their deepest oyster shells they drank hot, heartening orange curaçao. A merry meal it should have been!

It was the most silent and uncomfortable that they had known since their first fish breakfast on the island.

No longer did there flow between them the current of cheerful, chummy sympathy. Mount was fuming, as he had not before fumed, over the undiscussable situation. He was promising himself that once he had had it out with Lloyd, he would never speak to the old felon again as long as he lived. He would never see him. (His renewed anger against Mr. Lloyd was only aggravated by self-reproach. For he, Mount, had lunched off onion soup, veal collops, real bread and real coffee, and this "wretched kid" here hadn't tasted food since he had seen her. Never see old Lloyd again, nor any one connected with him.

Such were Mount's meditations during the feast.

As for Margaret—

She was possessed by that curious numbness which people call “thinking of nothing.”

Utterly absent, Margaret crouched by the fire in the dusk; silent, opposite to that silent young man. Again she felt that odd discomfort—not now pain! not now a stab! scarcely even a prick. Only as if something pulled almost imperceptibly at some string in her heart—rousing her, calling her—to what?

3

In the tropical island that she had formerly imagined, darkness rushed up to cover face of land and as quickly as the stage-curtain falls upon sunlit groups at the end of the third act. But not here. There had always been twilight. Twilight came now.

It was fragrant, fresh, of tenderest mauve. In the evening sky Venus blazed white. Other stars shone out to greet her. Presently the moon, a huge round creamy-pink disc, climbed slowly up from beyond the cliff to the right. Moment by moment the night-colouring grew richer, palpitating. Redly the bonfire glowed, backing the figures of man and girl; fitfully it flickered on the whites of their teeth and eyes; it picked out gleam of pearls on her neck, glint of gold at his waist. Beyond, all was purpling dusk; mysterious, vast. . . .

Some people might say: “It looked like a scene on the stage.” Perish the inaccuracy! For this was the scene that they of the stage continually try (and inevitably fail) to achieve.

When all is said, when have those flat boards created any allusion of Mother Earth's undulating breast?

What living, laughing light, what dewy dusk, can get across the footlights? What breath of the sea across the conductor's desk? What "property" suggests the rustle, the rhythmic sigh of nature, to those who know nature? When Art has done her uttermost, and reached her highest, there remains always that sense of the stage as the lighted-up box in which a child's cardboard puppets are jerked on clumsiest wire.

But here was the Wilderness of Omar—and of all his million brothers who have ever yearned—

"And Thou—"

4

"Are you going to sing?" asked Margaret.

For he had taken out of the case that fool musical instrument; blend of the savage and the sophisticated!

"I only want to find out if the beastly thing is in tune," he said—more shortly than he knew.

(Long afterwards he asked Margaret: "What do you mean by saying I was 'beastly'? I thought I was being so nice to you.")

He twanged the ukelele strings. Upon the divinely scented air they lifted their half-human snarl.

"It seems all right," said Mount, strumming.

Margaret cleared her throat. "Do sing, won't you?"

"Ah! I've never really learnt this thing. . . . Just picked it up. . . . Will you smoke one of those providential gaspers?"

To her own surprise and his, she didn't want to smoke.

This evening she felt "all nerves" again; but she did not feel that smoking would soothe them. In Hill Street she had been a hardened chain-smoker of perfumed cigarettes—a taste acquired in that dense atmosphere. Here it had fallen from her, with other acquirements—with her drawl, her craving for cocktails, her droop of the mouth, her involuntary turn towards the lipstick, with everything that was not a native trait of the sound and wholesome girl. While the man smoked and strummed she sat on her low boulder and fed the flames with bits of twig.

"Wasn't he going to talk to her at all this evening?"

At last in the soft twanging she caught his: "Don't you know any songs, Miss Verity?"

Margaret shook her bobbed head. "I love listening though—"

In the cottage Jack Verity had often sung; and his little girl (following him knee high from shaving mirror of his dressing room to carpenter's bench or potting shed) had listened, melted or thrilled.

"—My father sang so beautifully. Just old-fashioned songs that I don't suppose anybody has heard except my mother and me! My favourite was—oh, obsolete of course—'My Old Kentucky Home.'"

"But of course I know that."

Softly he strummed. Sensitive fingers that could lure the abject fish into their hold, that could imprint themselves on nerves of a woman's hand so that she would not forget their touch! With those fingers he plucked its soul out of that prelude. Then, into the delicious darky melody, he lifted up his voice. His was one of those velvet

baritones, untrained, unerring, that get the bull's-eye middle of every note, the middle of every melted nerve of any listener who has ears to hear.

“The young folks play on the little cabin floor,
All happy, all happy and bright,
By and by hard times come a-knocking at the door,
Then my old Kentucky home good night!”

Tiny silken rustling of waves were his obligato, gentle talking of naked fire. . . .

No words convey beauty of voice; no record can imprison it. It passes, swiftly as light that no camera, no point can reproduce. It is as the moment's beauty to which we shall not cease to cry: “Ah, stay; thou art so fair.” And to which there is no answer but the passing of that fairness.

Very softly young Mount sang:

“Weep no more, my lady:
Ah, weep no more to-day,
We will sing one song
For our old Kentucky home,
For our old Kentucky home, far away.”

Magic of voice and strings upon Island night! . . .
The rustling of the wave persisted, the talking of the fire, the sighing of the breeze in fragrance off the sleeping land. . . .

5

Briskly his speaking voice broke that magic: "Years since I heard that old tune; absolutely. I expect I got it all wrong. Quite as good as any of these new 'Blues,' don't you think so?"

Margaret—a dark shape against the glow with just one pinky gleam upon her pearls—could not answer at once.

He had twanged strings, not knowing what other string had quivered. . . .

CHAPTER XIII

NIGHT FREEDOM

1

BEFORE saying good night, she told young Mount: “You took the first turn of exploring! To-morrow I want to go for a tramp.”

“A tramp—why?”

“I’m tired of sticking to one little tiny place. I haven’t walked enough.” Uneasily Margaret felt that she could not, now, appeal to this man as frankly, easily as she could have done last night. For no reason something had come all different. . . . “I’m longing to get *away*. Mr. Mount. Let me go for a stretch; won’t you?”

Immediately she was sorry she had said “let.”

He talked to her like a polite stranger.

“Miss Verity, you’ve not been very long in training for this strenuous life!”

“I don’t want to be strenuous. I feel perfectly fit for a little walk—ten miles—”

“Not yet. I should have you crumpling up on my hands—”

“I promise you I wouldn’t.”

“You can’t promise those things,” remarked young Mount, putting away his ukulele into its case. His composure hid a certain trepidation. . . .

For this indescribable affair was now going to be touch-and-go. Short of tying that hamper-rope round the girl's ankles, how was he to keep her within bounds? She had now evidently taken it into her head to reconnoitre. Supposing she did?

It would be one solution of the problem. Possibly the best.

Supposing she did get away, gave him the slip, went off for her ten-mile stretch? Ten miles, unless she went round and round in a circle, must take her to a road, and jolly good made road, too. It would take her to one of those stony villages that looked like something out of Grimm's Fairy Tales, one of those churches set so high it seemed already half-way to Heaven. It would take her to people; peasants riding mules, goatherds. . . .

That would crash everything.

Suddenly Mount thought it would be a pity if she did, at the eleventh hour, find out. A curious resolution came. . . . Angry as he was with old Lloyd, he would back him up to the end. He would not allow the girl out of his sight. He'd think out excuses. . . . That was his plan.

"Well, Miss Verity, we'll see what you feel like to-morrow. Good night."

2

Late into the night Margaret lay sleepless, wide-eyed in her cave.

Overexcited, troubled, she twisted from side to side under that big overcoat. She asked herself: "What's the

matter with him? Something. Something new since yesterday.” Thinking: “Why was I so miserably wretched to-night? Why did I nearly burst out crying when he sang? I’m homesick. Here I am . . . far away from everybody I care for. . . .” Suddenly, thinking: “I’m sure of one thing. He’s keeping something from me. He has been keeping something from me ever since we have been here.”

Abruptly, instinct (after the occasional manner of instinct) scored its bull’s-eye: “*There’s something odd about this island and he knows what it is. Supposing we were not wrecked at all? Supposing I’ve been kept here, on purpose?*”

As usual, the star-turn of instinct met with a poor reception from the audience of common sense. Almost at once Margaret was thinking: “That’s absurd! What could have put such a lunatic idea into my head?”

Again, thinking: “But Mr. Mount is always trying to keep me from suspecting—what? Does he know for certain that everybody else was drowned? Did he see them go down? Can it be that?”

Wondering: “Is he asleep yet? He did once tell me that he had no sooner turned himself about twice and settled himself with his face to the sea, than he was asleep and knew nothing more.”

Thinking, anon: “Good! Full moon! Light as day for hours. . . . When I feel certain that man is fast asleep, I’ll get up. . . . Shan’t wait until to-morrow for any ten-mile tramp. I’ll go to-night. . . . I can walk and walk. Even if I don’t find out anything about the island,

I can tire myself so that I can sleep like a top when I get back—”

This was *her* plan.

3

Presently, that moon, which in the gloaming had shown a golden shield, was set like a silver coin far above the rocks.

“Now,” thought Margaret.

Pushing aside the coat, she rose, drew on her rubber boots. Then, remembering the scrub through which she had to make her way, she took off the boots again, to put on first the heavy golf-stockings. She also caught up the stripped bough that should serve her as alpenstock. Equipped, she clambered up, following the brook. Slowly at first, cautiously, softly (for fear of waking the sleeper in the other cave); then, more quickly, she pursued her climb. With every step she took there grew upon her the delight of adventure, twining with the sensation of night freedom.

4

Night freedom . . . the curious term is used for a mental state. Some people definitely believe that in sleep the soul can disengage itself from the earthbound body. Quite seriously, these people declare that they can distinguish nights when their spirits are thus raised from other nights when (captive in the flesh) the soul can gain

no freedom; the spirit part of them has not "got away." Those are the nights that tire. However deep the slumber, it has not refreshed.

Sleep remains the country unexplored. Our nights are acknowledged by science to be among the greatest mysteries of our days. . . .

Perhaps Margaret, in her old life of dancing until dawn and of sleeping in daylight, had suffered from lack of night freedom? On the island her deep sleeps had helped her cure. . . .

But to-night, even awake! the inner Margaret was "liberated" completely as if in dreams—yes, even as she moved through a world silvery-strange as are those silver dream landscapes. . . .

Boundless, colourless, the country rose; unrolling itself around her. Cliffs, that seemed Mountains of the Moon, bordered range after range of distant hills, ivory on silver.

Near boulders seemed ivory; rioting shrubs between boulders of silver-filigree. Her own hand before her might have been carved of marble. . . . From brown skirt and blue jersey colour had gone, and everything showed the livid moon-pallor which would be ghastly were it not so beautiful. Ah, symphony in silvers! That which gleams from slender birch-trunks, flutters on undersides of poplar leaves, spreads, studded with diamonds! on gossamer webs—grey of dove-plumage, grey of pussywillow, grey of petal-sheath were there to paint the wide strange countryside. . . . Swift glinting greys as of fish scales, tender grey of thistledown, grey of a woman's blanching hair,

grey of June sky, glowing greys that line the nacr  shell, grey of a child's clear gaze, grey wind flaws on the lake—all these were there; shifting, interchanging, in a scene colourless yet colourful, through which the night-free Margaret swung on her way.

5

Presently the ground ceased to rise, and her soft-soled feet made no noise on the plushy plateau. Twigs flicked her skirt. That, and her own soft breathing, were the only sounds. She had found it more comfortable to give up wearing the chain of jingling gadgets, now stowed away in a pigeonhole of her rock. She wore only her pearls, gleaming in the moonlight on her neck.

On she swung, oblivious of all but solitary delight. . . . As tiny stars were drowned in pervading radiance, so were any personal thoughts of Margaret's all swamped . . . no image blurred the lovely, goblin scene. That string in her heart, twanged by waking emotion, had now ceased to vibrate. She did not think of the man whose hand had plucked the string. No echo remained of his velvet, heartbreaking baritone. She, who hours ago had begun to stir to passion had not at this moment a sigh. . . . She did not feel how she was glad to be alone. Silently, rhythmically she swung along. No name, no picture, troubled her. So far from earth was she! So removed from the plane of the flesh, with its delights, its pangs! Restored to health of mind and body, she was conscious of neither.

She moved, a spirit in a spirit-world, under the moon's lovely, icy, stare impersonal.

6

That bright stare dimmed. Across that silver lake of landscape dark flaws seemed to flit. The night was clouding over. . . .

Margaret did not become aware of this until something more arresting had slid into her consciousness. This was the realization that *she had seen a ghost*.

It had gone before she "came back" to herself.

But . . . surely she had seen it? In full moonlight it had moved—a foursquare man's figure with a mat of hair that shone as the brightest thing in all that world of shifting silver. Why, only a stone's throw away from her it had stood, bathed in unearthly radiance! *Then* it was that the moon had suddenly clouded. When next she shone out, the figure was no longer there. While Margaret could have counted six she had seen it distinctly—realize that—distinctly as you see your thumb upon this page. Then, flick! gone! . . .

"A ghost?" breathed Margaret vaguely. Still her own spirit seemed only just to have struggled back.

"Of course! I know whose ghost that must have been. . . ."

She was not frightened. Always she had imagined that, had some spirit appeared to her of some one familiar and dear (say of her young father), she would have been startled enough, but not into fear. Now, all alone in this eerie landscape, having caught sight of what she took for

a spectre, she remained without a trace of that horror which would have turned the blood to water of any one who has the dread of ghosts. . . .

That was not Margaret's dread.

7

For, as we have our various loves and what spells ecstasy to one brings the profoundest boredom to another, we each have our peculiar terrors.

Some are afraid of the dark. To others the idea of small enclosed spaces brings dread as of being buried alive. Fear of snakes, so vivid in some people, is well known as the story of Eden. Some men who scoff at house-terror in women are themselves afraid of nothing but moths. Always Margaret's horror had been of That which was now even preparing for her. Even now, as from the silver magic she came back to real life, even as she thought: "Well, I'm tired—" Even as she began to retrace her footsteps, it was gathering. . . .

8

It was gathering in the southwest; clouding the moon, gradually filling the fresh, sea-flavoured night air with heaviness as of the inside of a mine.

"How close and sultry it's growing," thought Margaret; "almost as if . . ."

Involuntarily she lengthened out her stride.

Then, in all her suspenseful body she felt what was coming.

Quickly it ran over her, like the presage of earthquake which (many miles distant) causes New Zealand women to drop in sudden fainting fits. She let her alpenstock fall to the ground.

"It *is!*" she was warned by every tingling nerve.

Having felt it, she saw. First flash of lightning zig-zagged like a Corniche Road up the clouds.

And then she heard it; sound that set her blood running cold, her limbs trembling, her eyes and mouth widening with horror, her cropped hair creeping up upon her scalp. Behind her sounded low, distant growling as of angry beasts.

Her one terror. . . .

Thunderstorm. . . .

CHAPTER XIV

THE TWO TERRORS

1

AFTER that moment nothing was clear to her; not time, not distance, not how far she ran, not whether it was thrice or twice that she tripped, falling her length among scrub that scratched her skin. . . .

Behind her growled that menace, giving her wings.

For ah! how she was terrified . . . no hare coursed by greyhounds, no rabbit making its frantic bolt for the nearest burrow, no wounded bird stalked by the glaring cat has fluttered more wildly as it fled than this young girl overtaken by this tempest on the cliff-side at night.

Terror tore at her every fibre, since with those growing fibres the fear itself had grown up.

It is an old wives' tale that what has badly frightened the mother will impress itself upon the germinating nature of the baby whom she has not yet seen. This may of course be nonsense. But my friend Violet Verity, months before Margaret was born, had been caught in a thunder-storm, had hastened towards her garden gate as her young husband hurried out to meet her, had seen the lightning play around his hastening figure, had heard the crash of the thunder, followed immediately by that other crash of a ruined oak tree that had fallen to the

ground only just missing her darling as he ran to catch her in his arms. . . .

This incident may have had absolutely nothing to do with the one thing that could cause Violet's courageous child to lose self-control. But always the distant mutter of thunder would send that little girl rushing to take cover in her mother's breast, gasping: "Will it be over soon? Hold me, Mums! Hold me tight until it's over."

And here, where could she take refuge?

Blindly she headed for the course of the brook; some instinct must have guided her towards that dip in the cliff that gave the easiest slope down to her beach.

Ever more threateningly the storm came up from the southwest behind her, muttering like a head-down, pursuing bull.

I see that cliff-side as an indigo inferno of rock, scrub and boulder, under night clouds that themselves seem purple lowering boulders . . . and, flying downwards like a long blown leaf that skims the ground, is held up for a second, leaps, and skims along; again I see the slight figure of that girl winged by fear. Blindly scrambling down the slope she came, her one thought being to reach her cave and there to hide, to flatten herself against the sand like some chick over which the dark-winged hawk is poisoning, to roll her head up in that coat so that she need not hear. Behind her, drawing nearer, faster, more menacingly, the storm gathered over the sea to the northwest. Overwhelmingly, oppressively, incredibly close lowered those purple-black thunder clouds. They were looped down upon her like curtains, they sagged like the canvas

roof of a tent heavy with rain, smotheringly, terrifyingly, they gathered and lowered and sagged and seemed to press down ever more tangibly upon her head. Panting, sobbing, she was half-way down the slope, when something struck her cheek like a bullet. The first drop of thunder-rain. Presently another spattered heavily on the bent nape of her neck. Then lightning, green as phosphorus, ran along that slope to the sea, showing her own feet, showing twig and leaf of every plant. Gone in a second the picture seemed printed on her eyeballs for seconds after it had disappeared into the hot, indigo gloom. . . . And then, just above her as it seemed, the first near peal of thunder crashed out; crashed, rolled, crashed, rolled. . . . In the pause after that tumult, Margaret, insane with terror, caught the end of her own shrill shriek.

Then she heard Mount's answering shout.

2

Paralyzed as she was, senseless, shuddering! she did not know his voice in that man's heartening call out of the dark.

“Right—!”

Again the calcium-green flash across the sky! This gave an instant's glimpse of sea, sands, rock and of a figure, small-headed, broad-shouldered, slender, cut in black against livid coppery glow of clouds.

Instantly blackness grew up again. But on the black that picture danced for moments, still printed upon the sight. . . .

Even then Margaret did not recognize him. Even then

she saw the figure only as help incarnate, only as a human being hurrying to her aid.

"Here," she sobbed shrilly. "I'm here—"

Blotting out her words, thunder crashed, roared; but, through it! almost beside her! she sensed that heartening shout again. Into the dying-down of the sky's racket she caught—"Hullo—"

"Yes! I'm here!" she screamed. "*Here—*"

"Righto. I'm close. I've got you."

Hands closed on her shoulder, on her arm.

Then she knew it was Mount. Gasping, she turned to him. She turned and groped and fell upon him.

Hot, murky, ringing darkness hid him so that she could not have seen that dark graceful Dæmon-shape against that inferno. Only she sensed the rocklike refuge to which she turned, against which she flung herself; clung. Poor child, now fast, she clasped herself to the firm shoulders and arms under that moss-rough jersey! Drowning ladybird to a branch, blown bindweed to the protecting hedge . . . this was Margaret, frenziedly clinging to the man whose arms were now wrapped about her. Her eyes were hidden against his breast, but even so the lightning, flashing, cut its way into her sense of sight. He, too, ducked his head at that; closing his eyes upon her hair. Around them again that devastating artillery raged and roared and seemed to split the heavens. Shattering to the steadiest nerves! To Margaret, claimed by it before her birth, it was devastation. But, closer in her ear, she, trembling like shaken quicksilver, caught his deep-toned:

"Bit of a storm, this. It'll be all right. Don't be frightened. It's only—" The next crash seemed endless.

. . . For who, in a storm like that, can tell which is actually the lightning flash that shows every tiniest pebble, and which the searing picture left by the flash upon the tortured eye? Who can tell when it is still the bull-throated roar of the thunder itself, and when it is the loud echoes that racket in one's ears after the peal has passed?

Into the last of those crushing chords there came: "Slap . . . SLAP! . . ." Isolated raindrops spattered like flattening bullets upon the near-by boulders. Violently, with a shriller spatter, one fell against Margaret's wrist. Another, with another sound, dropped upon Mount's brogue.

She heard him say cheerfully: "Going to pelt with rain, presently! Look here, we'd better get under cover while we can. Here. To the right. . . . There's this sort of—" Slap! Another huge raindrop got him actually in the mouth as he spoke.

"I see there's a sort of shelter place under the rocks. We'll see it in the next flash. I shall shove you in if you don't—"

Just after the next flash he picked her up off her feet.

3

Like a puppy being helped into a car Margaret let him lift her. Let? Precious little "letting" about it, one gathers. Helpless, half-crazed with fright, the poor child felt herself carried a few steps downwards, then pushed, shoved into some recess . . . it seemed almost like the bunk of that yacht. She felt herself being gently bumped

down, as a child bumps its doll, into a half-sitting position.

"Mind the rock just above your head," came his voice.

Rocks seemed to be at her back and above her; the ground was sandy—or dusty? Only long afterwards Margaret realized the place it was. A sort of arch formed by two boulders, flanking an overhanging brow of rock—a huge, naturally formed cromlech backed by the cliff-side. Below, the cliff sloped irregularly down. The slap of raindrops sounded faster now upon the face of it, but she was well under shelter.

Only—was that warmly comforting refuge of human arms going to be drawn from her? In the next flash she seemed to see him moving backwards; while almost simultaneously the sky above their shelter split to another of those deafening crashes . . . peal after peal, it seemed as if it must shatter the whole cliff to pieces, must bring every boulder down, like a child's house of bricks. Was he leaving her to this? So tightly she clutched him, the rough jersey was dragged down about his neck until it seemed, he thought, a cord to throttle him.

He felt the movement of her lips rather than heard the words they tried to frame.

"You won't leave me— Please—"

"Of course, I'm not going to leave you, child! I'm coming in here to sit by you, if I may? . . . An awful squash, I'm afraid. . . . I won't leave you." Here a fresh explosion followed another of those lurid search-lights.

Gently Mount had disengaged Margaret's hands from dragging at his jersey's collar. At the fresh tumult the girl clutched him again, hiding her face against his throat,

clipped him, in the tightest belt that he had ever known, around his waist. It was then (he thinks) that some thing in his waistbelt went "crack!" but only hours afterwards did he find that the glass of the miniature on the watch he wore in his belt-pocket had been shivered and starred across. Only later he found that. For now he had this frantic child in his arms to keep from going mad with terror in the increasing storm.

"All right, all right. It can't touch you, my dear. Bury your head. Yes. Don't listen. It can't touch us in here. This is a wonderful pitch; great luck we were near it—"

He edged closer into that rock crevice, easing the strain of her arms. He sat huddled up against her. He threw his left arm to wreath her shoulders; his right hand clasped, firmly, her upper arm. His long legs, stretched out just under cover, made the lintel to their cell.

"It can't go on forever. Nothing can. Ah, here's the rain in earnest now. By Jove—"

4

Violently the rain lashed down. Hissing, it flung its sheets upon the bay; flatly slapping, it took the rocks and boulders. Rustling, pattering, it poured into the scrub; close to their refuge some large—fleshy-leafed plant—a cactus perhaps?—took the drops to the sound as of a rolling drum. . . . All those sounds resolved themselves into a noisy, angry-sounding symphony of rain. The next flash of lightning showed it like a heavy curtain of strung silver beads between themselves and the

dark. The bay indeed seemed changed into a flat-bottomed amphitheatre of white mist, where the rain, striking the smooth sea-water, spattered up again in millions upon millions of tiny, broken fountains. And presently there broke out into that chorus of rain-noises the voice of their swollen stream.

I, who was not there, have to make my own version of the scene—which may or may not be correct. Sights, sounds and feeling of that night have to be pieced together. . . . As sight I get . . . well, nothing much. In the intervals between the flashes everything must have shown as masses of inky purple—stationary indigo masses (which were rock), slowly, heavily writhing, drooping, grape-purple masses (which were thunderclouds). Only every now and again the livid emerald across the horizon showed pallid misty sea, jagged headland, showed, too, most definitely every shadow and shape of that rock cranny, in which was set, as in an alcove, that living-statuary group: terrified, shuddering maid, young man in whose arms she had taken refuge (much she knew or cared if it were a man young or old, or a woman—her mother or me or whomsoever).

As sound? . . . There was that artillery of the storm—"a thousand coal-carts tipping over into the chute at once," is my homelier image; there was the growing crescendo of the brook and cascade, there was the steady many-voiced lashing-down of the thunder-rain. Now and again it seemed as if the thunder were abating . . . then that clasp would relax a little about his belt. But again the storm symphony would take an encore. . . . Again the clasp would tighten. The small face would bury it-

self more desperately against his shoulder, against the side of his neck or whatever came nearest to her. . . . Against his breast he would feel her heart beating more wildly again. And so through an hour or more. . . .

5

At last against his ear he felt her lips moving again, he heard a tremulous mutter.

"Frightfully sorry. . . . Frightfully ashamed of myself. . . . Can't—can't help it somehow."

"Ah, Margaret, I know you can't!" he broke in hearteningly, with a heartening pressure of his fingers that circled her trembling arm. "I know you can't; but what does it matter? Why, plenty of people are that way—lots of people! Always in a blue funk whenever there's any thunder about! It's not only—"

"D'you know," she muttered quiveringly, "just before you came up . . . I thought I was going to die. . . . Shouldn't have minded that nearly as much, because then I couldn't have heard . . . oh!" with a shudder that shook her slender body from head to foot; and shook him too. "There it is again. I thought it was over. . . . Don't let me go. . . . I'm sorry, but *please*."

"I won't let you go, honour bright. . . . I wish to God I'd a nip of brandy for you."

"Wouldn't do any good. Only please . . . promise you'll hold me tight until it's over."

"All right, all right, dear! I can't hold you any tighter than I *am*. It's just that infernal noise . . . Lord! That sounded like a land mine going up. Nothing hap-

pens, you know. . . . Of course it seems so much worse because we've had such calm weather the whole time we've been here. Like tepid milk. . . . Then this! Force of contrast. . . . Like somebody who is usually amiable suddenly bursting out into a blazing temper. . . . Much more alarming, isn't it? than a blazing temper from some one who is accustomed to having ups and downs. . . . Never mind. This can't go on. . . . Don't look at the flashes! . . . That's the last lap, perhaps."

But it was not yet the last lap. Still the storm raged. Still the time went by.

It went by; and they, who felt and heard every stir of one another, saw one another only in flashes as dark shapes, a lighter hand, a livid face, a gleam of eyes or pearls. Faltering, her voice came from against his breast.

"You must think me the worst coward you ever met."

"Ah, don't be silly. It's only about this. I call you plucky. You've *been* plucky enough about all the other things. You have! I've seen you, Margaret."

"Anybody else would think I was a most ghastly coward. . . . Tried to remember I was a sailor's daughter. . . . But anybody would think—"

"They needn't, I'm sure," retorted young Mount. "I don't suppose there's a soul alive in the world who isn't afraid of something."

"Do you think that . . . Do you really think so, Mr. Mount?"

"Rather."

"But even," she persisted tremulously, "people who are supposed to have to be brave? A sailor's daughter, even?"

“Why not? Or a sailor for that matter,” retorted encouragingly the voice of that dark shape out of the darkness. “They often say of some hero or other: ‘He never knew what fear was.’ That’s rot. He may have got the upper hand of it, but if he’s mortal man he’s known what fear was, you bet.”

A queer conversation, if you remember that it all went on while this couple of the modern young remained locked in each other’s arms; making a group that might have represented the Loves of the Cave Dwellers.

Yes, for by fear they had been flung into the group which from time immemorial has been composed by love. But of this they had then no consciousness. Huddled together for warmth and comfort, she, clasped to his breast! he, wreathing her with his arms! still remained without consciousness of love, passion, or sex forces strong as any that split the night clouds and lashed the seas outside that sheltering recess where Mount and Margaret clasped and talked. Strange, strange must have been the contrast between the impersonal tone of the two young voices and the attitude of the two young figures! Detachedly they answered one the other, talking out of an embrace that could scarcely have been closer had these two become already the most ardent lovers.

To speak at all, Margaret had to lift her young mouth from the side of his neck against which it had been pressed as if in the warmest caress.

But all she had to say was: “You think it’s really true that everybody has been afraid of something?”

Wistful, plaintive, it must have sounded in the night—the voice turning childish with terror as she gasped: “Ah!”

"That. What was that, Mr. Mount? Thunder coming over again? Please, please go on talking to help me not to listen. Tell me. What about you?"

She did not remember, of course, that only to-day she had realized that never, never had this reserved young man broken through the reserve, to tell her anything about himself. She had wondered if he ever would. . . .

Now the time was at hand.

When she quavered: "I don't suppose *you* have ever been afraid of anything?" He answered her, amazingly without reserve.

"I? Not afraid of anything? You're wrong there, Miss Verity," returned the encouragingly matter-of-fact tone of the man whose chin was resting on her hair, whose fingers were warm with the warmth of her own rounding shoulder, and into whose breast there had stolen unnoticed the light, smooth, sliding touch of the pearl string clasped about the girl's own neck. You're wrong, Miss Verity, because, as a matter of fact, I've always been deadly afraid of one thing."

"You? But you've got the D.S.O., and you were in a destroyer and blown up three times and everybody seemed to think you were wonderful in the war and all that kind of thing. I've heard about it—"

"I know. That is the kind of thing one hears about. I don't mean that, you know," retorted young Mount. As he moved slightly she felt as well as heard his little laugh. "There was that, of course. One always knew one might be for it at any moment. But those outward things, getting killed, getting blown up or sunk—you

know, there was something that always made me feel much worse afraid than that."

"What?"

"You won't laugh if I tell you?"

"How could I, possibly?"

"Ah, I know you won't. Well, then, to tell you the truth," he said very simply, "I've always been afraid of love."

6

"Afraid of love?"

Arrested, the girl in his arms forgot her suspenseful agony lest the storm should not be over.

"But why are you afraid of love? I didn't know anybody was—"

"I don't know if anybody else is, I only know I am."

"But how—afraid of it?"

"Badly afraid."

"But what do you mean exactly? Why should you be afraid of love?"

"Several reasons . . . yes, several. . . . For one thing, it hurts," said Mr. Mount, the usually bafflingly, completely reserved. His voice dropped a tone; she felt that. "Damnably it hurts. When you're made so that you care—care so crazily for people. Well, it's a curse. Just a curse upon you. You understand that?"

A pause, broken only by the steady, many-noted thrash of rain (crystal-strung portière to their shelter), by the

rhythmic drum, drum, drum of drops upon that fleshy plant just outside.

Margaret's voice, interested, steadier than it had been, replied:

"I don't think I do understand. Tell me about it."

"Do you know that I've never told anybody? Never breathed a word of it to any living soul?"

"Oh! I ought not to have asked—"

"Ah. Don't be silly. I'm going to tell *you*. I don't suppose I could, you know, if I was able to see you. But . . . this is different. Well, to begin with, I was frightfully fond, of course, of my mother. She died, you know" (quickly he slurred over the words). "It was rather ghastly, that. That was when I was a tiny little chap. Then later on—after I went to school— At school, you know, one sometimes makes wonderful friends. Wonderful friends; they can mean the devil of a lot. Having everything in common with them. . . . Thinking no end of them. . . . There are some fellows—well! do you know, just having known them and how wonderful they were, seems to alter the whole course of your life. Hero worship! . . . I don't know if girls have it in that way. I don't believe they do, Miss Verity."

"I never was at school," replied Miss Verity, moving her cheek against his throat as she put up a hand to her pearls. It was then that she'd found that her string, fastened about her neck as it was, had (while she clung to Mount) dropped inside the breast of his thick jersey; here it had caught on a loosened stitch of wool. It made a looping, coiling link of smooth, milk-warm pearls between him and her. Drawing them free, she pulled them

out of the way as a girl, dancing, does with a necklace that irks her; she pulled them aside, scarcely realizing that she had done so, for she was absorbed only in what they were discussing. "My mother taught me until I was twelve, you know. Then I had all sorts of masters and French governesses and things to come to the hotels, wherever we were, to give me any lessons that amused me, all by myself. That's not school life, of course. So I never had any school friend. Nor any very great friend—"

Noticeable, perhaps, that she neither mentioned nor thought of the name of Cynthia Oddley, once such an influence in her life. Silent, she listened for what should come next from the man's mouth three inches from her own.

"Girls," it said musingly, "are supposed to be more romantic than we are. I don't believe that. I think girls are much more practical. Much less dreamy; less imaginative, less sympathetic. More prosaic in a way, girls. Of course, I've hardly known any girls really," he added ingenuously. "But what was I beginning to say?"

"Friends at school that you cared for—"

"Ah, yes. Well, of course presently they went. Right out of one's life they went. One never saw them again. All divided and scattered. One suffered like blazes. . . . I hope I'm not boring you," he broke off here with the oddest little relapse into a previous, a London existence.

"Go on, go on; and then I shan't be afraid of listening for—the other."

"Right you are, then. Well; can you see what I went through? No. . . . But—honestly, my dear, it was hell.

. . . People would laugh. Whenever one cared for anything it got to mean too much . . . ah, madness, to let oneself! Then they went. Then, the last thing." He cleared his throat. "Poor old Charles!"

"Your brother," murmured Margaret. "I can imagine."

"It was rather the *comble*," he said. "It was after that, I think, that I pulled myself up. I made up my mind: 'Dashed if I ever let myself get tied up again in any sort of strong feeling that gets one . . . mauled.' You see, I'm afraid of it. I feel like you do about the storm. Cowardice, I know. Mine, I mean."

He spoke in a voice she had never heard before, of things which she would never have looked for in either of the Archie Mounts she knew; for this was not the conventionally charming, the London-tailored-dinner-guest aspect of him; neither was this the efficient cast-away who built bonfires, fished, brought down ilex boughs, dragged hampers over rocks. This was a Mr. Mount she certainly hadn't met. Indeed, one does not know if anybody else had. Was he finding himself? Liberated by darkness and storm and the utter strangeness of the whole situation, for once the essential Archie found himself (night-free after a fashion!) discussing with this girl in his arms a subject which only in the recesses of his mind would he ever have talked to himself.

"Simple cowardice. Love, that's my ruling fear."

"I understand," said the girl whose fear was storm. And she spoke a little tremulously, for a belated flash of lightning had flooded the very interior of their dry and sheltered nook. She had seen every surface modelling of

its rocky walls; she had seen, actually, a spider in its web across one corner, a big many-legged spider.

Quickly she thought: "Spider at night brings luck."

Then, through thrash of rain, sounded the growling farewell of that storm. Involuntarily there tightened upon his waist the hands of the girl afraid of thunder.

"I can't help it any more than you can," confessed the young man afraid of love. "I realized: 'Well, if I'm made so that I feel like this about relations and pals, good Lord! where should I land myself if I let myself go over a woman?' I could imagine it. Yes, I could imagine myself. It's putting all one's eggs into one basket. Handing oneself over and not belonging to oneself any more. One can't—one couldn't take one's mind off it. One's soul—literally—not one's own. It would be possessed by another human being."

"People say that's so wonderful."

"It might be. *Tant pis*. One would *live* thinking one might lose her; one would lose her. Or it might be anything but wonderful. . . . Some one who turned one down. . . . Some one— Supposing it all meant nothing to her? There one would be, Margaret. At the mercy of the thing. All cut open and raw to it, like I've seen fellows. Fit for nothing any more—just at its mercy—*chucked* about—"

"Would you be?"

"But I know I should. I should be hopeless. I could imagine myself. My dear! It was like standing on one of those crazy little mountain bridges, and staring down too far into some ramping, raving, torrent beneath—"

Imagine, in that night of alternate murk and of flicker-

ing flash, the thunder blending with the sound, close in the girl's ear, of this confession of a young man. His breath was caught in between his teeth now before he went on. Margaret recognized that note of shrinking dread with which he spoke.

"Supposing I were to let myself drop down there!—let myself be carried away by falling in love? Supposing I were to let myself go! No. I've always known I must not let that happen."

"That was before you got engaged to be married?"

"Years before. Years."

"But since then you've become engaged."

"Ah, yes," he returned in quite another voice. "That was why, largely."

"How can you mean 'that was why'?"

"Of course, because an engagement—that's so different, isn't it?"

"Is it, do you think?"

"But of course it is! That's an utterly different thing, don't you see. Another matter altogether. A man has to marry, after all, sometime. Besides, that keeps things placid and settled and safe."

"Oh!" commented Margaret.

She did not at that juncture know whether she agreed or disagreed, whether she thought it strange or found it perfectly natural that a man should be afraid of love, should for that reason become engaged to a girl and should look forward to marriage as the means of keeping life placid.

At the time it probably seemed natural enough, or at all

events not much more unnatural than anything else in nature.

7

She added: "But the girl?"

Here you must realize something that may seem a little incredible.

Absolutely no memory had Margaret at the moment of that pain which had stabbed her at sight of a girl's portrait set in his watch. For the moment she forgot that brooding, that ache which had lasted until she saw him again. . . . Oh, yes, that had been the stirring of jealousy right enough! For the moment, however, that manifestation of waking passion had ceased to stir. So various are the moods of a maid with a man. So fundamentally was her mood now, from when she had thrilled to his singing in the firelit gloaming. Fear of storm, possessing her, had blotted out physical attraction to the mate. . . . He had assumed the protector; he had resumed the chum. Forgotten was dawning trouble, forgotten the awkwardness and *gêne* that it had caused. Margaret, with a heart full of trust, childlike gratitude and confidence, was deeply interested in all that her friend had told her to-night.

It was as a genuine afterthought that she added, now:

"But the girl?"

"Enid, you mean?"

"Is that her name? That is your fiancée in the miniature you have set in your watch?"

"Yes, that's Enid. She commissioned some artist friend of hers to do it for me—rather a good likeness."

"Well, what does your fiancée feel about things like that, Mr. Mount? What does she say?"

"Say? She doesn't say anything particular." He spoke almost as if she were on the island with them!

"She must talk to you?"

"Why?" He laughed a little; Margaret felt the stir of it. He added: "Please don't imagine we don't get on together. We get on very well, Enid and I; she's a wonderful dancer. I first met her at a dance. Well, we just dance and—what else does one do? Play tennis—she's remarkably good. Get asked to stay at country houses together. Play golf together. Ride. Nobody wants to talk the whole time."

"I know. I mean, I can imagine people not talking the whole time even if they are engaged. But what I mean is—she must wonder—she must think about whether you are—what does she think, Mr. Mount?"

Curiously detached, he replied: "What do girls think? Modern girls with plenty of interests, plenty of things to give them a good time. What are most women like about marriage and all that? Cutting out the ready-made clichés? . . . When they haven't got to be impressing the man, or their friends, or anybody? . . . At the bottom of their hearts? When they were being absolutely sincere? Personally, I don't believe they think of love at all."

"Not *think*?" repeated Margaret, indescribably interested.

"Not girls."

"*What?*" she exclaimed.

Simply and directly as a brother, more interested than the average brother, he said: "Well, you are a girl; what about yourself? Do you find yourself thinking so much about it?"

"But I have never been engaged."

"That—" He made a little sound, half-contemptuous. "Is that the criterion?"

"I suppose not. But I've never cared for anybody," said she, who had so queened it over her bodyguard. "Only—"

"Only what?"

Margaret was silent.

She knew now that deep down under strata and silt of Hill Street life, she had always cherished a hidden conviction that love, which must come, should come wonderfully. . . . How explain this to this young man?

It was he who continued:

"You thought being in love and all that was the main-spring of existence? For women?"

"No—"

"Yes; own up! Yes, I believe you did. I'm sure your mother thinks so. Well, so it is, in a *way*. But not what I've been talking about. What most girls want nowadays, I imagine, is not the man—not love at all."

"Well, what then?"

"Ah, what they can get out of life through the men! For a clever, ambitious girl, opportunities. Opportunities to make a wonderful hostess, to meet interesting people; to travel, perhaps. To be 'somebody.' For the average girl—oh! the general buzz and excitement of get-

ting engaged, and what sort of a ring, and writing to acknowledge congratulations, and being photographed for the *Bystander*, and settling about the wedding, and 'Oh, I must take you to call upon such and such friends of mine,' and writing out endless lists of guests, and interviewing agents, and going to look over a town house. They take the main fact as a matter of course; engaged girls. They assume that's all there is to it, and that the rest is— Oh, chat out of books," concluded young Mount.

He had never been so near to the Enid who was his promised wife as he now was to this other girl whose lissome body he held clasped in that embrace that only seemed this girl whose face he could not see since it was doubly hidden by the smothering night and by being pressed into his shoulder. Never in his twenty-nine years of life had he talked so frankly, so easily, so intimately to any girl. To think that she would be a stranger to him but for the unbargained circumstances of these last weeks! But it was only hours—these hours of sheltering from the midnight storm that had drawn them (mentally as well as literally) near.

Years of Hill Street, London, civilization would have left him uttering the usual banalities to her about the floor, the new show, the boat race; would have left her, not too politely, half-listening to him.

But now, musingly, the confidante in his arms on his breast remarked: "I remember saying to somebody or other that I wondered if love were as amusing as it was made out to be."

Quickly Mount asked: "What did he say?"

“. . . I'm afraid I forget.”

Indeed, she could not at that moment remember whether she had said it to Claude Oddley, or to that red-haired boy called Eric. Probably to both. . . . It was too many ages ago. . . . And, after all, they had been such babies, these boys! how could she remember what they had answered?

The deep voice of Mount came out of the darkness.

“So you wondered if love were amusing, did you? Ah! Don't try to find out,” he advised her. “Steer clear of the dashed thing! Romance? More amusing things—better things—in life than that after all. After all, too, lots of this rave about love must be pure fake.”

“Ah, now you're taking that view?”

“Obviously the most sensible one.”

“What, that there's nothing else in it? ‘*Maya: illusion*’? But,” objected the girl clingingly, “if there were not something else, you would not be afraid of it.”

“Good Lord! my dear child, I never said there wasn't anything else. Only, as I tell you, I've made up my mind never to go near it,” explained Archie Mount, with his arms still and always wrapped perforce about her. “Personally, I don't give it a chance! I wouldn't either, if I were you,” he warned her. “Don't, if you're wise—”

Then, abruptly, was silent.

In that pause Margaret should have felt something; some stir of electricity that was not of the storm outside; suddenly grown tension in the atmosphere, not due to the sultriness of the cave where they sat in each other's arms? But in the mood that she was in she did not respond to that message of the atmosphere. She missed it.

She only remembered (now that they had stopped considering love) that she had a thousand questions to put to her companion on quite another subject. She had meant, as soon as there was time, to begin with the question: "Mr. Mount, what is it that you're keeping from me about this island that we are on?" But here they had been talking as if no such island existed. Extraordinary. As if they had been partners waiting in the interval at a dance . . . or even as if they had been college chums sitting up, talking late in rooms together. . . .

Now, however, she would ask him.

Immediately, however, the question was washed out of her mind by another.

Anxiously she exclaimed: "Mr. Mount! Why is your heart thumping like that? Are you ill?"

"Ill?" he repeated, very angrily. "No. Ill? Of course not! It isn't my heart that's thumping," he muttered, as he moved.

Fiercely enough it was hammering, his heart, against the girl's own as she lay there in the arms that were within a second of tightening, vehemently, upon her; within a second of turning that brotherly, protective, passionless clasp into a real embrace. He was all but losing his head. So suddenly, so unexpectedly, impulse had fallen upon him.

For years, remember, this young modern had seen himself as a man who, while acknowledging its power, had succeeded in cutting human passion out of his life. (This is done about as easily as garden elder may be rooted out from borders in which it has once seeded.) He then turned his back upon the thing.

Here, it springs up to face him!

Not without warning. The first had come when he heard Margaret's voice below him on the cliff crying for help. The anxiety that had stabbed him then might have answered any woman's appeal; not only that of the companion whom he had seen dropping one by one the blemishes of overcivilization, the girl whom he had seen literally blooming and rounding out under her coarse attire as she responded to age-old medicine magics of sunshine, air, simplicity, exercise, sleep. By degrees, the obscuring cloud that had dimmed Margaret's native health, beauty, sweetness, had passed. Day by day there had gleamed out the milky pure, alluring radiance of the veritable pearl. This he had seen; not yet had he felt with his heart. Not consciously. . . .

But that second warning! that thrill which had raced hotly through him at the clasp of her own warm young hand and she had asked him: "Did you hold my hand in the boat?" That had been enough to unsettle him, keep him ill at ease and on his guard, drive him from her side for an endless day.

And then that storm! His instant instinct to go in search of her, his hideous moment when he found her cave empty, his heaven of relief when, in the tempest-sultry dark, he heard her voice again. Then those hours, locked together closely as a couple in "Les Noyades," in that cave.

No danger there—to begin with.

For again the lovely, burgeoning girl, that emerging disturber whose voice might stab and whose touch might at any moment thrill, had been hidden and sheathed away

from him; she'd relapsed into the helpless child, the lost kitten, the waif dependent upon him. Deathly terrified she had been, with a terror that he had had, perforce, to soothe against his breast, and which he had only silenced by matching against it his own secret fear. . . .

Good Lord! how he had babbled. . . .

But it had been all right. He had talked to her as to a human being, not thinking of her as either girl or man. Just a human being in distress. Sex left completely out of it. Completely.

Until—

Ah! Until in one moment, swift and revealing as the lightning's lurid flash, passion . . . ! Flaming, it had sprung up in him. Through all his trusted defences of resolution, reason, habit, that pagan mood had in one moment crashed. In that one pulsing moment it had caught Archie Mount, that reserved and balanced modern, by the throat, shaken him to the core. Even the girl herself, all ignorant, exclaimed in sudden innocent surprise: "Why is your heart thumping like that?"

8

"It isn't my heart that's thumping at all. I'm getting a bit cramped though, as a matter of fact. Just a bit of cramp in my left leg."

"I'm so sorry."

Margaret drew a little aside towards the rocky wall of their shelter so as to make what room she could for him in that narrow space. But how absurd to say that his

heart hadn't been thumping! Why, it had suddenly pounded as fast as hers during the worst of the thunder. . . . It had pulsed as strongly as the engines on that yacht. And why *pretend* that it hadn't? Sitting as they were, enlaced—the pattern of his rough jersey printed off against her cheek and the lines of webbing from his belt stamped off, as she could feel, against her palms, how could she possibly help feeling also that the man's heart had pulsed quite differently for a few moments against her own breast?

"I suppose that was the storm?" she said anxiously. "The electricity. . . . It always makes my own heart go—"

"It's going. I mean the storm is going over," returned Mount, quickly. "Listen, Miss Verity."

A short pause.

Outside, framed by that square of rocks, the rain thrashed down, but more moderately now. For some time now there had been no flash, no echoing peal. The storm had spent its rage. The strain was lifting, lifting with every minute, that oppressive tension in the dark was lessening now. A freshness was coming into the air. It was over.

Mount could tell that by the instinctive relaxing which rippled down every muscle of the lithe form he still held, but less closely. He repeated: "Over!" And drew a long breath. "To-morrow will be gloriously bright again. It will be just like yesterday."

"—like yesterday," agreed the girl in a voice that trailed.

9

Half-asleep already, he realized.

Poor child! . . . Only a child, after all. . . . Tired out!

She had been done in first by her tramp along the cliff—how lucky that when the thunder had threatened he had felt that she might be frightened, had turned at once to her cave, and, missing her, had climbed immediately in search of her!

Done in she was, first by fatigue. Next by the fear and strain of these last hours.

Poor child, poor child!

Enormous pity invaded the man, ruling out every other feeling. The girl was just dropping off. From about his waist her hands came unclasped. One of them fell, lax, against his knee.

He did not move.

More regular grew her breathing. More steadily, more quietly her heart beat under her rough jersey and softly rounding breast.

He did not move or suggest that they should make their way down to the beach. What was the use of her getting wet through on the way to that cave of hers? She was dry, warm, better where she was.

He felt her draw a longer breath. Then her drowsy voice said absently: "I can't think what reminded me—do you know what I was wondering?"

"What?"

"About that pearl."

"Pearl?"

"Yes," he heard her sigh. "The pearl that Cleopatra—"

There was a long pause.

Carefully in a whisper, he reminded her: "What about Cleopatra's pearl?"

There was no answer. Only her soft breathing—only the rise and fall of her breast upon his own.

Dead asleep.

10

Presently over her head he peered out past the overhanging rock. The rain had ceased. Above the quiet sea the sky was unrolling that peculiarly depressing blank canvas effect that comes just before the dawn. It seems to threaten that all dawns must be hopeless.

There came over him, no doubt, a man's desperate yearning for a smoke and a drink.

He had matches, he had those cigarettes somewhere. . . .

He didn't stir. Once, his lips moved.

Mount, that ultra-reserved, young modern, was thanking all his gods that he had just managed to get himself in hand.

Decent instincts. Pity, the sense that "dash it all he must play the game"—these, by themselves, would not have been strong enough to fight primitive passion. It had clamoured; taking him suddenly off his guard! it had clamoured so wildly: "I want this girl—I've got to have her! *Now!*"

There had come to silence passion something of its own

nature, something, too, akin to pity and to chivalry—in fact, the head of that family—Love!

He loved her. He, so afraid of love, had been found by his enemy even as the maid afraid of storms had been found by hers; and now he knew how he loved her. . . .

He had got to have her, but only if and how and when she would. . . .

Margaret in his arms stirred, and he feared that she might be waking.

But no. Still dead asleep, she made a gesture natural and touching as that of a sleeping baby. With her half-closed fist she had struck out, to push him a little aside. In sleep, she curled herself up more comfortably with her back to the rocky wall, she moved her tousled head. Her face, her little, slumber-warm, innocent face still nestled between his arm and his chest.

In utter security she slept on.

He didn't move.

Presently, as he was, he too dropped off into slumber.

Slowly—rosily—smiling hopefully now, Dawn came up over the island.

CHAPTER XV.

DAY AFTER

1

“**J**UST like yesterday,” young Mount had prophesied of the day to follow the storm. He meant not only the weather.

These clever young men are astoundingly simple-minded *au fond*.

For how could any day, after that night, be expected to resemble any yesterday in the lives of these two?

Too much had happened. Too much and not yet enough.

2

Margaret, who had slept like an infant in his arms, had not even moved when (cautiously and noiselessly) he got up. Two hours later she woke to find herself alone. Large-eyed, she stared about the rock refuge; dry as Gideon's fleece in the midst of a pearl-drenched landscape. Why was she not in her usual cave?

She remembered everything and blushed scarlet in her extreme of miserable shyness.

When she moved out, putting aside the rain-wet bush at the entrance—when she straightened herself, to stand upright in brilliant sunshine, she encountered skies of the bluest, rocks so coral-red against blue that Margaret

blinked at the sight! Every leaf, twig and pebble, washed clean by the downpour, shone in the burnished, garnished world— Margaret had no eyes for this beauty. Everything else came pouring back upon her in a flood of reaction. Last night; last night . . . !

Incredible, that she should have flung herself into his arms; but she had . . . she had cried to him like a child to hold her . . . she had stayed, held there, all night! Against his heart, and talking *abjectly*. . . .

Now, standing bathed in sunlight, Margaret thought (as has so often been thought on the day following an evening of confidences): “What possessed me to talk so much?”

The man had talked even more; this ought to have comforted her. (It never does!) Staring down at scrub whereon, looked at one way, raindrops lay like iron-grey dust, while, looked at the other way, they flashed in diamonds, Margaret remembered every word that young Mount in the dark had poured out.

“Afraid of love!” In the sultry dark with Hades let loose and raging outside, Margaret had understood, had been conscious of such sympathy.

All spoilt now. Vehemently she wished that she never need see this man again. Vain hope. Oh, but if it had been anybody but Mr. Mount . . . if she never need speak to him, never set eyes upon him more, what relief!

3

You see what was happening to her; I see; any woman could see; quite a number of men would see. But Mar-

garet Verity did not. In years nineteen, she was in emotion so much younger.

Ah, these precocious women of the world who think themselves *blasé*, whereas the truth is that they lack experience of everything but the merest frills of life! . . . In knowledge of life itself, any rosy haymaker of their age puts them to shame. For Margaret, luxury had for long choked up, with surface rubbish, the springs of emotion. Until this island sojourn she had remained dormant and deaf.

Now the voice of instinct sounded. Later, she thought that she must have heard it long before. But on this morning of radiant renewed sunshine, she stood, bewildered, burdened, gloomy; fighting against the knowledge that she was being called and drawn into love.

She made herself think: "I hate a *man* who is afraid of anything! As for the kind of man who talks to you about his engagement, he's a bore. And anyhow I hate—"

From below there floated up, faintly, his distant hail.

"I shan't go down," said Margaret, as if he could hear her.

4

What was there to go down for? Breakfast? She wasn't hungry. His fire? She wasn't cold. His society? Heavens! how it bored her! Bored was she, with the blue sea's empty blink, with the eternal beach of which she knew the shape as well as she knew the shape of Mr. Mount's shoulders.

The place got on her nerves. She was jailed. She knew just how the prisoner feels in his cell, the polar

bear upon his Mappin Terrace, the bullfinch in his cage.

Or so she told herself, gathering together every other reason for her passionate reluctance to go down and face that man.

She could see herself—a stilted young woman, stiffly apologizing for the nuisance she had been last night. Colourless intonation—but with that colour rushing up to the roots of her rough hair, down to the pearls below her throat!

She could also imagine how Mr. Mount, the protective chum of last night, would have changed.

He would be wooden, embarrassed. “Oh, not at all. A nuisance, Miss Verity? Please don’t say that.” A voice, once cordial, can take on tones which build a fourteen-foot stone wall, with curved iron spikes on the top, between friends.

Sooner than face that wall she would stay up here, all day.

Again there was wafted up on fresh and fragrant air his distant call: “Coo . . . ee!”

“Shout away,” retorted Margaret, little-girlishly. “I shan’t come.”

He would probably come up there to see if she were still asleep.

Let him.

From the sandy cave floor she picked up a slaty slab, a pointed pebble. Upon the slab she scratched, awkwardly, her first written message to him:

“Gone for walk. Back later.

“M. V.”

“Margaret” he had called her last night. . . .

A curious hotch-potch he had made of “Miss Verity’s” mixed up with “Margarets,” with “childs,” with “my dears.” Several times “my dear” (careless intimate address of the modern young to girl-chum or man-chum). Once he had even said “dear”? After that “Miss Verity” again; with Miss Verity’s face buried in his neck at the time, if you please; with the rough worsted of his jersey scraping harshly (albeit reassuringly) against Miss Verity’s lips.

Farcical paradox!

She hadn’t felt anything then.

Now in retrospect she felt his touch, tangible as though he had left a warm slave-bangle circling her upper arm!

Ah! if she could take some gigantic magic sponge and wipe out of life, as from a blackboard, everything that had happened. . . .

Violently she dumped her slab against the rock. . . . What about hanging her pearls above so that their gleam should catch his eye?

No, he’d only think how she always left everything lying about.

Like a wild thing she sped up the cliff-side towards a clump of dark ilex, rich and grave in the sun—she passed it, hurrying on, in a direction which she had not before taken.

5

In spite of her late night she moved springily and with pleasure—she told herself it was a comfort to have her

back to the loathed beach. She thought: "If ever we get off this odious island, I'll forget it and him and everything belonging to it. . . ."

Here there crowded back upon her the delightful "everything"—her new sensation of hunger, her heavenly bathes and sun-basking! Her fresh experience of physical health, the pleasure that she took in the improvement of her own body—for now again she had nothing to feel ashamed of during her daily rub-down; again it could have been said of her that the solitary beach fitted and suited her as no dress artist in Paris could have designed clothes to suit her. Now, when she put her hands up to her pearls she felt no longer sudden hollows, bony prominences, only the texture of wholesome, satin-smooth flesh.

Just as she had never been so well for years, she had never been in such looks, in such happiness. . . .

"Nonsense!" she exclaimed, pushing a stray hank of hair out of her eyes, then again angrily blushing.

He had cut her hair—

"I shall never let him touch it again." On she pressed, her tweed skirt growing heavier with raindrops that it gathered from bushes of Cystus, vermouth, lavender, wild rosemary, between which she passed unconscious of surroundings.

Once she thought she heard, borne on the breeze, the sound of tinkling bells.

But that must have been hallucination. . . .

Forging ahead more quickly, she realized that with every yard she was growing hungrier. . . .

Not his fault, he had called her down to the breakfast he had prepared!

Very vain he was of his fishing, his general efficiency. He probably thought he was just the right sort of person to be cast ashore on desert islands.

Possibly all young men thought that?

6

Once the bodyguard had discussed this perennial subject of desert islands.

(Odd, of course, if they hadn't.)

Claude Oddley had announced that, feeling like death, he would prefer to go down with the ship. . . . Eric had hoped to be the only survivor rather than be cast ashore with just one companion. Two days of the unmixed society of One would cause Eric to feel not only like death himself, but like causing another's death. The Prince's double had thought it would be marvellous to marry one of these South Sea Island girls who knew where things grew, and how to plait things . . . wearing just a red flower behind the ear. "You ass, it's the men who wear the red flower on those islands," another boy had told him. "Means, 'I'm looking for a sweetheart.' "

Childish nonsense they'd talked! Imagine being left here with any of *those* boys. "Well, I wish to Heaven I had. I would rather have had any one of them—" But, on which of them could she have relied? Which of them would have known what to do about fire, shelter, food? Which of them, especially, would have so nursed her on that morning of muscle soreness. Which of all the men she knew could have coped with a crisis like Archie Mount?

“But, I could have *faced* any of those others, this morning. At least I think I could.” Only—

None of them would understand last night. Not Cynthia, even.

(This was the first time for days that the name of her once constantly consulted intimate had entered Margaret’s mind.)

Imagine if she told Cynthia Oddley: “I was so afraid of the storm that I spent the entire night—I should think from about twelve o’clock until half-past six in the morning—clasped in the young man’s arms. Held so close to him that I could feel his heart going like a motor, so close that my pearl string dropped inside the neck of his jersey, so close that his breath was moist upon my hair. I held him so tight that I heard the watch glass in his waist belt snap. . . . All in the dark I cowered there, locking him in my arms. He, talking to me to keep me from listening to the thunder. He told me a secret he had never told anybody else. He told me what he had been afraid of ever since he had left school, and why. He talked to me about his mother. About the girl to whom he became engaged because he thinks she will keep things placid—”

Here Margaret sighed. Still, on her arm, glowed the physical memory of Mount’s clasp, that invisible slave-bangle. Echoes of his voice whispered: “Wonderful friends one makes . . . they seem to influence one’s life. . . .”

Other memories pictured the features of her own girl-

chum; peaky, illusionless, be-monocled, and *blasé*. Imagination mimicked Cynthia's: "And how soon did this admirable youth begin to make love to you on his own, Peggy?"

And when Margaret swore that there'd been absolutely no hint of love-making from start to finish of that night of storm?

"Come, come. That's *ra*-ther tall!" (again, Cynthia's cynical echo). "The lad didn't take any advantage of the romantic situation? Oh, how *sweet*! Not a fond kiss before you *severed*? Sportsman. Speed-merchant! What? Why, he must be— Am I expected to *believe* that he never once tried to . . . flirt?"

"Would anybody believe it?" Margaret wondered, wistfully. . . . "Surely they must. If they knew him. (Engaged, too.) If they knew me? Surely then they would see that I was telling the truth."

Cynthia's phantom voice mocked: "Peggy! would you believe it of any couple in the world, left as you were left?"

"I know that I should be generous enough to *know* that some men can treat even a girl as if she were a human being—"

In Margaret's heart something reminded her: "Lots of people aren't generous . . . won't believe. People can be *horrible* about those things! Only your own mother, perhaps, would believe. Don't pin your faith to another soul! . . . But in any case it doesn't matter who believes what. If we don't get away nobody will ever hear. If we are not taken off this island—"

Here Margaret suddenly stopped dead with surprise at what she saw.

8

Driven inland by tumult of nascent emotions, swinging along like a boxer in training, outer landscape had been blotted from before Margaret's eye. Unseen, there had passed that panorama of slopes falling to ravines, rising to rocky heights, fringing into groves, fading away into ranges white as Alps against the ardent blue. Lost upon her, even the point when cliffs had dropped behind!—and when she had begun to go down hill again!

She ought to have felt when her foot, from treading uneven turf, had been set on other ground. She didn't feel anything. She heard something. Suddenly something tinkled. Not bells. She thought her chain of gadgets (which, by the way, she wasn't wearing) had slipped down. Looking down, she saw. Her foot had struck a horseshoe lying on the highroad.

9

Yes, a highroad!

Well-laid, broad, dustily white, on her right it disappeared around steep rocks. To her left it dipped down, down, down into a wild green valley where she could follow its course for miles. Like a pale tape measure it zig-zagged in and out of that greeny-grey map. Not a house to be seen! Not a roof, chimney, or spire; only here and there hills showed the white stitchery of cascading

streams. It was as grandly wild country as one could conceive, showing no sign of life but for the black buzzard, hovering in the blue above her head. Desolate, but not without a road . . . then . . . it was no desert island at all.

Margaret stooped to pick up that horseshoe—no, too narrow, too small for a horseshoe; it was the shoe of a mule; of brightish metal as though it had been newly cast. Clutching it so that it hurt her palm, she realized at last that this was not a dream.

She had come to the road . . . to the way out. What was she to do? Follow it? In which direction?

A few steps took her round rocks to the right. Here another surprise made her gasp. It was the most civilized of sign-posts, painted shrill canary yellow and inscribed in big black letters:

“DON DE DUNLOP”

“France?” gasped Margaret.

To the right, also, zigzagged miles of road, well and truly laid by that race to whom alone has descended the road-making genius of Roman conquerors. France?

Again she turned to the brilliant sign which said:

“ATTENTION AU VIRAGE”

and a name unfamiliar to Margaret, followed by the number of kilometres.

Margaret, who had been thinking in hundreds of leagues, thinking of the southern Pacific . . . thinking of Fiji . . . was it possible she had not left Europe?

Hotfoot, she set off back again to that deceiver on the beach.

Oh, she could face him now! She knew he must know. She had found him out now; and she was going to take it out of him!

No wonder he hadn't worried about the wreck, or what had happened to the sailors, or to the other boats, or to Margaret's own uncle—

“All his doing, I'm sure—”

She could have whistled with glee as she came up to the beach, to the blessed smell of food.

Softly, swiftly she approached. Quite a feast Mr. Mount had laid out. Everything that had been left over from last evening's revel.

Humble pie for *him*—at once!

But no. Better fun *not* to say anything. She wouldn't mention for two days at least what she had discovered. She stood, watching him; wondering incidentally when men outgrew the age for children's make-believe; for the charade game?

At twenty-nine, Mr. Archie Mount was conscientiously, solemnly laying out, on primitive platters of flat pebble, brook-trout that he had caught with his own hands—just as if he were not within a morning's walk of a French road! That road must surely lead in time to some French town, of narrow, coffee-scented streets, of *boucheries*, *épiceries*, *charcuteries*, *pâtisseries*, and other provision shops of which the French names sound so much more appetizing

than the English ones? Surely those not-too-distant shops would, after their habit, be spilling over on to the cobbles their store of seductive foods? . . . But there he rooted and wrought, earnestly as if he himself believed that but for his efforts he and she must starve to death. He was not even whistling this time.

Gaily Margaret cried, "Hullo!" behind him. "Good morning, Mr. Mount!"

The young man, starting, nearly dropped a trout into the flame. Then he turned upon the girl the face of a man furious because he has not dared to be too anxious.

"Oh! You're come? . . . Do you know how long you have been away? . . . Where have you—"

Here he stopped, violently staccato. For he had seen. His blue eyes, widening under their thick black brows, fixed themselves upon the mule's shoe that Margaret had slung into her belt. He stared, silently.

"You may well say that, Mr. Mount," remarked Margaret.

(The word "damn" was all but audible in the atmosphere.) Frenziedly he wondered how much she had found out? Had she been up as far as one of the grey-stone shepherd's hovels complete with climbing grapevines, tethered goat, and tragic-faced Madonna squatting on doorstep? Had she met—

What would she tell him?

He said, tensely: "Anyhow, had we not better lunch now?"

This conventionality almost caused to fade away from around him cliff, rock, bonfire and to conjure up in their

place the crimson wall-papers and ponderous furniture of his London club. Politely he added: "I suppose you've not *had* anything to eat, Miss Verity?"

Miss Verity opened great eyes upon him; caught a small corner of underlip between her teeth. On the point of nervous laughter, she took refuge in what may be described as "prep-school wit." "Anything to eat?" she feinted. "Up on the hills there? Not being a goat, I don't eat bushes or grass."

Stonily Mr. Mount said: "So I am aware."

"Then why ask if I have had anything to eat?"

"I happened to notice *that*." He nodded towards that mule's shoe.

Margaret, unslinging it from the belt, looked at it guilelessly. "This? But not being an ostrich, either, I can't eat metal."

This deplorable sally (regretted as soon as produced), he met courteously.

"I mean, of course, that it showed me where you have been."

"Then you know where I've been?"

"Of course, Miss Verity. As far as the road, at least."

"Oh, I thought you meant that you knew the name of the place? I thought you were going to tell it to me? Aren't you?"

"What," asked Mr. Mount resignedly, "is the use of my telling you, if you know it?"

Here he scored his first point. Margaret bit her lip, exasperated that she had not memorized the name she had seen on the yellow-painted signpost.

Pause.

CHAPTER XVI

TALK

1

HOW quarrelsome, the meal that followed!

There they sat, one each side of their established bonfire with its accumulation of white thrice-burnt ash, circle like a seabird's nest of black twigs; spoiling for a wrangle, if there were nothing better. . . .

Excited as she was, Margaret was hungry first; she devoured half a dozen of those biscuits—which she now knew had been no wreckage, but bought tamely and recently out of one of those French provision shops inland (wherever “inland” was). She imagined the small, coffee-fragrant den; its posters for “Gibbs” and “Peppermint Get,” its nets of onions, the immense, cadmium-yellow pumpkins set about its doorstep. She swallowed some of that heartening curaçao (also, out of that shop), before remarking:

“So it was all a practical joke, Mr. Mount?”

He looked at her; apparently hostile. . . . He loved her very badly! Quite how it had happened he couldn't say. . . . The short cut to a woman's affections is to let her do things for you. . . . We all know that trait, *in woman*. Don't ask me if this be so with men. I resign any understanding of your average, hundred per cent

male and his affections. That which urges them to spring and causes them to wither are alike hid from one's eyes. Only one apprehends that in the exceptional man—the intelligent, the sympathetic, the attractive, the gentle as well as the manly, there is found a fairly strong dash-of-the-feminine. As in Archie Mount. He had turned—slowly, but inevitably as anchored boat moves with incoming tide—towards this young, helpless creature left to his care.

She could not meet his eyes. Looking away she said: "I suppose you think this is funny? Men would."

"I don't, I assure you. If you mean—"

"I mean your giving out that your yacht had been wrecked and everybody but ourselves drowned—"

"I beg your pardon, but did I ever say anybody had been drowned?"

"—pretending that this was a desert island—"

"I hope you don't mind my pointing out to you, Miss Verity, that all the time we've been here I have not mentioned the words 'desert island'?"

"I hope you don't mind my pointing out that your last remark is mere hair-splitting."

After this rally, another pause. More food eaten.

Then Margaret again:

"But when *I* said desert island you never contradicted me. You let me talk about the chance of our being left here for life. You took good care not to let me stray away from this tiny bit of beach. You pretended it was because of the fire or because of my being tired. I wonder you didn't camouflage a few savages out of the crew.

Don't pretend that you didn't know I was being taken in by this gigantic hoax the whole time. Mr. Mount! you can't pretend—"

"I am not attempting to pretend."

"Not *now*, because you have been found out," the pseudo-castaway said, crushingly. "You admit now that you knew all the time what I imagined. Don't you?"

"Yes, Miss Verity, I do. It was what you were meant to imagine."

"And you did your level best to keep me deceived."

"Yes."

"Here we were—not stranded at all! All this time we were all within reach of people and towns and telephones and telegraph offices! Utter fool that I've been, letting you persuade me that we were as far away as Crusoe and man Friday. . . . By the way, where *are* we, Mr. Mount?"

"That I can't tell you, Miss Verity."

She opened her eyes. "Do you mean you don't know yourself?"

"Oh, I *know*, obviously. But I've given my word that while we remained here I wouldn't let you know."

"You mean you promised?"

"Just that."

"Promised my uncle, I suppose?"

"Well, since you've guessed . . . yes."

"Was he with us in that boat, coming off the yacht, that night?"

"He was."

"Anybody else?"

"My man Wallace and two of the crew. They landed us here."

"Then they disappeared and left us?"

"Yes, they rowed back to the yacht."

"Which was not sunk, then?"

"I didn't say she was sunk!"

"No, you didn't *say* so. And where's my uncle now?"

"I wish to God I knew, Miss Verity," retorted young Mount with convincing fervour. "I don't know where the—I don't know where he is. He ought to have been here, all this time. I was given to understand that Mr. Lloyd was going to remain with you, during the whole of your—your visit. To tell you the truth—I don't think he is far off."

"He isn't far off," agreed Margaret unexpectedly. "I saw him yesterday."

With a biscuit held halfway to his mouth, Mr. Mount stared.

"Saw Mr. Lloyd yesterday? You saw him? What do you mean? Where?"

"I did see him yesterday. At least I thought I saw a man with white hair—I wasn't sure, last night. . . . I thought for a moment I saw somebody following me. . . . Then he vanished. Went off into the darkness . . . I forgot about that. It was just before the thunder and—"

Here she caught herself up—angry with herself for having brought back, with one word, the whole scene of last night; storm, flight, hours of crash, flash, strange muttered confidences—

Hotly she coloured. She dropped her head, bending forward to pick up the end of a bough which, burnt through, had dropped, black, onto the paper-white ash. She threw it back into the fire's heart.

"Has my uncle gone mad, do you suppose?"

Young Mount was within an inch of answering: "I've often wondered." Instead, he followed the instinct of siding with his own sex when criticized by the other.

"Mr. Lloyd mad? Anything but. An uncommonly clever, shrewd, able man. Nobody could call him—"

"I could. I do," protested the dutiful niece. "If he were not completely insane, why should he have taken it into his head to do this incredible thing to me?"

Without answering, Mount turned upon her a fleeting, fluent look.

That look said: "Don't talk like a little fool. You know as well as I do that your uncle meant to sweep you out of harm's way. Out of leading the wrong sort of life and getting under the thumb of an utter waster of a girl, a sponger and a wrong un. He meant it for your good. You can't say it hasn't been the best thing that ever happened to you?"

With this, the look mingled appeal: "Don't be angry with me, anyhow. Haven't I been put into a rotten position? Can I help it, child? Was it my scheme?"

Further, that glance betrayed: "You lovely thing!" It said; "You lovely, innocent, adorable thing! Lovely, you always were, even with scarlet grease all over your mouth and bootblacking in your eyelashes. And now— Look at you! You're a picture. The most exquisite little face

in the world; the body of a young caryatid. Fire-and-velvet in my arms. . . . I shall not rest until I've got you there again!"

But she had not met his look. They went on with their wrangle, eating hungrily, speaking as disagreeably as possible.

"Do you feel justified, Mr. Mount, in telling me anything more about my uncle's inconceivable plan? How long was I to be left here" (angry glare at the cliffs)—"here?"

"Honestly, I don't know. Had I guessed it was to be so long—" Pause, indicating that every second had been purgatory.

"May I ask if my mother knows?"

"Mrs. Verity imagines that you are still cruising in my yacht."

"Ah! Mums was taken in too? That's one comfort. My own mother did not know about this Island of Spoof. . . . How many people do?"

"Three. Your uncle, your mother's friend, and myself."

"Three people. An infamous way they've behaved. I suppose it's too much to hope that they are ashamed of themselves?"

2

While she rated him she was admiring him. Looking like a common tramp, but how handsome! Why didn't Nature turn out *all* men like that? Even that fair short beard which, contradicting the blackness of his hair,

blurred the outline of cheek, chin and neck—even that didn't spoil him. Nor did those clothes, that he had lived and slept in since the wreck, disguise his build. The most exquisitely-turned-out grandee who ever strolled into Piccadilly after spending half the morning under the hands of his man—what would he look beside Archie Mount? Trivial. A boy-mannequin.

3

“Where is your yacht?”

“In harbour.”

“Are you going to tell me which harbour?”

“I am sorry, but I am not allowed to tell you any names at all. I gave my word. You understand, Miss Verity?”

“Perfectly. You don't suggest *I* want a man to break his word. But that you should have been weak-minded enough to promise— That I don't forgive.”

“I don't forgive myself, Miss Verity—” curtly.

“I am glad you have that decency,” remarked Miss Verity loftily, controlling her wish to laugh aloud in glee.

For ah, she was enjoying this! Archie Mount all to herself, at her mercy, listening to anything she said. Taking it wonderfully, too. In every respect he was unique. Adorable being! What insult could she next hurl at him?

The trout which Mount had let fall into the flames when Margaret appeared was of course overcooked. He took it—deliberately Margaret found herself taking it away from him. Quickly she said: "Give me that one. I like them burnt."

As a matter of fact, she loathed them thus. But she took the burnt fish; and as she saw him eat her own deliciously cooked one there went through her a curious thrill.

"*There!* He's enjoying his food," thought Margaret triumphantly.

The young mother, ministering to the boy-baby at her breast, knows that satisfaction. The cave-woman, attendant on her hungry hunter, must have known it.

The modern woman is a halfway house inhabited by three distinct types: the cave-woman, the coquette, and the feminist.

Which of them appears depends entirely upon the man who knocks at the door. To some men the flirt is ever at home. The demands of other men bring out only the feminist to stare defiantly from barred windows. Curiously enough, it is no longer your "strong, silent, masterful," domineering man who successfully stirs the "primitive" woman. He it is, rather, who mobilizes the irritated "feminism" latent in every modern; and he's lucky if he still wins a smile from the cold coquette.

But the Archie Mount type seems to retain the gift of coaxing out, to welcome and to cherish him, that warm-blooded, half-forgotten cave-woman.

5

Outwardly severe, Margaret continued: "How long will it take me to get to the nearest place from which I can communicate with my mother?"

Young Mount frowned, making calculations.

"Late into the evening. To get to a town at once is what you have decided to do?"

"Obviously. And—Mr. Mount, have you got any money?"

"On me? I am very sorry. Not a bean. Not even my papers. I was rushed ashore. . . . We'll have to borrow money, that's all. We'll have to wire, then go to our Embassy."

"Ah! Our Embassy. How perfectly splendid to see an Englishman again, properly groomed and decently dressed. I suppose there will be no difficulty about our borrowing money?"

"I assume not," distantly.

"Splendid! Then I shall be able to buy myself clothes and things and get my hair shampooed and brushed and cut like a human being—and my nails done—and myself tidied up. How divine to be *civilized* again—"

"You are so keen on that?"

"Keen. Heavens! You expect me to be anything else? But imagine getting back to men and cities. Imagine talking to people. Imagine having real meals . . . eating with silver . . . tablecloth . . . electric light . . . carpet . . . flowers in vases. Fancy sleeping in a proper bed with pillows . . . fancy a hot bath. Oh, fancy going back to everything—!"

"You mean you've hated all this?"

"Haven't you, Mr. Mount? How extraordinary," she drawled. "I should have thought anybody but a sea-lion would have loathed every minute! Personally, I have been feeling like death . . . what do you say? . . . I might as well have been in prison. In fact, far better. People doing time are allowed to see visitors sometimes, aren't they? So they have far more to enjoy than I had—"

As her voice shook a little, she stopped. During their tremulous wrangle they had cleared every crumb of food. Now, rising from her boulder, Margaret began collecting debris to bury.

Watching her every movement he said stiffly: "You needn't wash those stones. Why not throw them into the sea? It's been our last meal here, Miss Verity."

"How glorious! Our last. Cheers! You mean we can start off inland at once? . . . Tired? Good Heavens, no! Even if I were dropping with fatigue, the mere idea of getting away would make me fit for forty miles. Why waste another second here? I shan't . . . but I can leave you here. . . . *As* it's your idea of a pleasant spot to put up at, indefinitely—"

"Good Lord! *pleasant*—hah!" A curt significant laugh. "Do realize that I am at least as thankful to go as you must be. But I am afraid you will have to allow me to come with you, Miss Verity. For one thing, I know the way—"

"So I gather. Very well. Then if you are ready—"

Her glance of hatred must have betrayed to another woman how entirely he was the one man in the world she found worth a look. . . .

6

Leave them, resting as it were before another encounter with tongues.

Return, for a brief interlude, to England—London and my own club, where at that moment I was taking coffee in the lounge, close to a girl who, over her own coffee and cigarette, frowned as if worried; a young girl—slim, brunette, smartly dressed from self-assured hat to snake-skin shoes.

In picking up her dropped box of matches, there slid off her finger a ring which rolled over the rug. I handed it to her; the handsome emerald set in brilliants. She slipped it onto the suspected finger, thanked me, and came into this story for just a few pages; here.

“A boon,” she told me, “to find some one to talk to.” The brother she was to have met had let her down and her lunch had been ghastly . . . “being alone when you are at your wit’s end what to do accentuated it!” I said it seemed a pity that any one alive, young and pretty should be at her wit’s end.

Following my glance at her ring, and drawing a long breath she said: “Yes, of course it *is* about that. Dreadful, to be engaged—!”

Some people may wonder at my receiving confidences from this girl whose name I’d never heard? But isn’t it from strangers that one expects confidences?

The sister, the old schoolfellow, the family friend—these are shy—have reservations, cannot let themselves go. They know you too well! People who have never seen you before and who will never see you again, these

are the people who help you (with no ungenerous knife) to slices of their lives. The need to ease the inmost soul of woes, like the care-burdened honey fly that breathes its murmur to the rose was upon that girl in that club that afternoon. Only three other members were discussing committees at the further end of the lounge.

I asked sympathetically. "What is the matter with him?"

In a cry from the heart the pretty brunette explained: "He's *dull*."

Presently: "‘A delightful young man’; people say, ‘so thoughtful and pleasant.’ All very well. . . . Why can’t he do anything? Oh, he’s interested in things, I suppose; never bored, even if he’s never excited. . . . So dependable. Always does the right thing, knows the right people, says the right thing at the right time. So uninspiring. People think him ‘so good looking.’ Good features. Nice figure. Everybody saying: ‘What a charming-looking man your fiancé is!’ One looks pleased and says: ‘So glad you think so.’ But who cares for a faultlessly good-looking man? Well, his eyebrows *are* too thick. No shape, just two dark smudges on his forehead. Otherwise, perfection," complained the girl, crushing her cigarette-end viciously into her saucer. "Dances well. Plays tennis well. Such a good shot. Men say a topping fellow. Women would fall in love with him . . . if he encouraged them! He never does; never will—"

There rose before me a complete mental image of this correct, presentable, uninspiring swain.

But I wanted to hear more.

"You," I said, "have annexed the sort of young man that countless nice girls are looking for."

"Why don't they find him? Why don't they take him and marry him? He bores me, he bores me. He makes me as dud as he is; it's the only word. Takes the go out of me. The moment the poor dear comes into the room everything goes flat grey!"

"Why not break it off?"

"Can't break off things without saying why. Not engagements that everybody else says are 'so suitable.' Besides, I hate hurting people. I know he would be hurt, in his mild way, like a slug crossed in love! Besides, everybody would wonder and I couldn't bear any one to think that I might be breaking it off because—"

"Of somebody else?"

"Yes and no," she confessed shakily. "There is a man I've met since I was engaged. Older—well, fifteen years older than I am; but oh, such a boy! so sympathetic, so clever, so alive; makes *me* more attractive. Quite brilliant I become with him! Do you know men who have that effect upon a girl?"

"I have—heard of them."

"And—do you know the sort of horrible tea one gets at a railway station?"

"In a grey china cup as thick as a doorstep with 'Return to Welshpool' stamped on it in black—tea tasting like ink? Yes. Why?"

"Well, this sort of man makes that sort of tea taste like champagne, if only you are drinking it with him," declared the girl in love. "Alone on a desert island, *with*

him, I should feel we were in the middle of a record Ascot. He melts the greyness; floods the world with pink light. The thickest London fog looked like the beginning of a perfect day, on mornings when I went to sit for him—”

“Ah, he painted your portrait?”

“A miniature. A present for my fiancé!” smiled the girl drearily. “The sittings were Heaven. Then being called for at the studio by my fiancé, to go out to Prince’s, was dropping out of Heaven into the middle of a missionary meeting!”

“Your fiancé didn’t see that?”

“Doesn’t see anything ever. Those conventional lifeless dummies—to put it kindly—imagine everybody else must be exactly like them—”

Ever more clearly, imagination showed the apathetic spoil-sport to whom this unlucky child was plighted.

“I feel as if I had been positively *married* to him for *years*,” moaned the girl. “Sometimes I remind myself: ‘Well, do remember you’re only *engaged* to Archie Mount—’ ”

——!!

But in even tones I achieved: “Oh? Is that his name?”

“I ought not to have mentioned it, considering how I have been abusing him. But it doesn’t matter, does it? You haven’t met him.”

“No, I have not met . . . him.”

So true is it that a person may be a house, inhabited by several persons. Certainly I had not met the world’s worst wet blanket who was her Archie Mount. I had seen a hearts’ charmer, one smile from whom a girl might have considered as a decoration. But to this, his fiancée, he

turned the world grey. Great Ishter, how was it possible? I suppose the answer lay partly in the spirit in which he had entered into his engagement?

("It's panned out well," he had imagined.)

"You," I declared, "must break it off with this Archie of yours. Your artist is another proposition. He may happen, or not. . . . But you'll be all right once you get away from this misfit. Somewhere you'll find happiness, magnetism, rosy radiance-and-wine-of-life. But not from your Mr. Mount" (slight emphasis on the "your").

"Sack him," I advised. "Oh, my dear! for the sake of both your future happinesses, go into the silence room, sit down at that table in the window, and write breaking it off, *now*."

"You think I ought to? So glad. Because I've done it," announced the rebel to whom Archie Mount had been engaged (dreaming she would keep things placid). "I've written to him at his club. I'll go and post that letter at once. I *can't* help it. *Poor* old Archie. . . ."

7

And meanwhile, far away, those two still lingered by that bonfire. Its flames had burnt down to the glow which, flushing through thick white wood-ash, seemed a bed of rose-pink flowers under a snowfall. It needed stoking up; but there was no longer any need to feed that fire. This creek would no longer be a place where people lived; a home. She had slung those stones which were platters down the beach, into the sea.

Three splashes—four.

Then silence, broken only by rustle of tiny Mediterranean waves, by dying whispers of embers, by call of gulls overhead.

Then, surprisingly aloud, the sound of her own voice. She heard herself ask, pitifully as a child called too soon away from some lovely treat:

“Need we go? Need we?”

CHAPTER XVII

THE LOTH-TO-DEPART

1

SHARPLY young Mount demanded: "What did you say?"

Why repeat it? Margaret knew he had heard.

Immediately he added: "Did you mean need we go at once?"

2

Had she meant that?

No. Hadn't it been an instinctive heart's cry voicing her secret passionate wish? Oh, that this need never come to an end!

This was life. Not that other to which he meant to take her back. What awaited her? The whirl of excitement and stimulation—of obtaining the journey's end, finding out where she was, getting money and cabling, fitting herself out, meeting again her mother—ah! that would be wonderful! Her friends—what friends? Margaret's one friend was here! the bearded, jerseyed, long-limbed, shaggy, unscrupulous young hooligan who had lent himself to a conspiracy against her. Him she could not keep. He would go back and reassume the perfect and conventional caller at Hill Street. He was the property of the Enid whose portrait he had in his watch. He

would go back to Enid; marry Enid. After which everything she cared for must drop out of Margaret Verity's universe. Leaving her what? The old stale round of feverishly doing nothing in the Ritz and Rolls—unamusing amusements—rather an attractive bridge jacket. . . . “Have you seen the show at the— Wonderful new place!”

Nothing new in the old life. Here she would have been happy. Here alone she had lived. (Need she go?) Here health had rushed through her in a joyous vivifying stream. (Need she go?) Must the rest of time be spent until she was old, until she was dead in looking back to these few, fresh, sunshiny, laughing weeks? (Need she? Ah! need she go?)

Every nerve in her young, perfected body clamoured against it; demanding why? *Why?*

3

Mount said stiffly: “Just now you did not think you would be too tired.”

Margaret, gallantly fighting invading blankness, declared that she was not a scrap tired. “It was only I thought—what about getting in another morning's swim? Couldn't we take one more day? One?”

“I am afraid not.” With the word Mount was on his feet. (Stay here alone with her another day? After last night? Not likely.)

“If you are not tired, then, we will start.”

“Rather, let's start now. (A sailor's daughter. . . . Mustn't show how horribly I'm hurt . . . behave like a

sailor's daughter.) I'll just go to my cave, Mr. Mount, and collect my things. It sounds like luggage! Of course, it's only my chain and danglements. And your motor-coat that you lent me that I have had all this time. I'll get that."

She turned to that rock passage, through which she had come that first morning to find him beside the newly kindled fire.

Everything reminded her . . . every boulder, every cliff-ledge, every bush above it of wild rosemary. "Rosemary, that's for remembrance." Would Margaret ever be able to forget? Not a hope, thought she, as she moved away.

He moved after her. "Oh, don't bother." His tone was so carefully controlled it sounded bored. "Do let me fetch the coat for you, Miss Verity—"

"Oh, no; I'll get it, Mr. Mount."

That was all before the crash. . . . Absolutely all they had said, these two. Merely she turned to look at him as she spoke. Merely she found him closer than she thought. Their eyes—blue man's gaze—sweet, grey, girlish, wide regard! Their eyes met; met, hesitated, locked.

The next instant came the finale to all this pretence, this reserve, this "behaving" of theirs.

Crash.

For his very next words were spoken in a voice that she had not yet heard.

Hoarsely it broke out: "Ah! it's no use—"

Swiftly his two hands closed upon her upper arms. A short desperate laugh escaped him. "No use. Margaret. You know it isn't. Darling, don't you?"

Margaret with all her world whirling about her did know. She did not even gasp a "What's no use?" for the sake of form. She just waited, coral-rosy and still as if her exquisite girl's face had turned into coral-rosy still stone at the touch of those hands braceleting her arms. The deep dive of his eyes seemed tangible as any touch. This look she did not evade. Even, she returned it. She stood, held by hands and eyes, and all her young body was one prayer that she need never be let go.

"You're going to have me? You're going to marry me, aren't you? the absolute first place we get to? the first instant we can?" She only answered with a widening of her own look; silent, intent upon him.

"You will? You've got to, Margaret! You will?"

She thought that if she did not answer he must still beg, the adorable one. Yet her voice disobeyed her will; it came: "You said you were afraid."

"What—?"

"Last night. . . . You said you were afraid of—it."

"What? Oh! Yes. I said that. Ha! No wonder. Yes, I must have been always mad afraid I might not find you. My darling! Mine, mine, mine! I have now. Haven't I? Speak to me."

She made herself forget for a moment, keep utterly still. Storm of delight was tumultuous within her, this girl who had been afraid of storm. Wine, music, brilliance, gaiety of a thousand colours had left her cold, had left her dormant once. Wide awake now to rapture she stood under his hands, and knew in this one moment all that mortals seek in wine, in music, in colour, in per-

fume, in brilliance, in excitements. Often they seek it vainly. For since money is to be made out of humanity's hunger for delight, sham delights are feverishly provided. Shams fill our city lives . . . elaborate mechanisms seek to apply the urge, the uprush and the bubbling over of pleasure. It cannot be thus bought. Fatigued and greedy and despairing (as Margaret had been), youth clutches at these shams, and since there is no thrill in shams, believes there is no thrill in life. . . .

Thrilled now by life's most primitive happiness, Margaret, who had once wondered if love were "as amusing" as represented by "chat out of books," stood answering with every fibre to the touch of the beloved's fingers, to the profound caress of his regard, to the vibration of his deeply emotioned voice that found only the tritest words as of a fourteen-year-old in love:

"Speak to me, can't you? Say it before we go from this place. . . . I say, you know, we've got to go directly. We shall have to. Must. It's an infernal shame. We must though. Directly. But you'll never leave me? You've loved being here? I have. You'll never leave me again after this." Shifting his grasp from her arms he put his own about her, he enlaced her, drawing her up, drawing her close to his breast as she had been last night—but how differently! He repeated, into her ear as he had spoken (with what a difference!) in that cave: "It's no use. Can't fight this. My sweet. My girl! I meant not to say a word until you were with your people. . . . Sorry, I can't help it. Just can't."

From her parted lips there escaped, then, a small sigh of:

"Oh! . . . Do I *want* you to? . . . I can't help it, either."

"Say you care, then. *Say* if you do."

"I *won't*."

This admission he drank—so thirstily!—from her soft mouth. He kissed satin-smooth flushed cheeks; lips, fresh as the salty breeze. Not a thought came to him of how he had once with such detachment discussed the possibility of just this situation . . . "it won't happen. You read serials! . . . Won't happen in real life . . . sorry to crash your romance!" He muttered love names into kisses passionately as though fear had never been, nor any thought of keeping life placid. Lifting her chin, he kissed the soft underneath of it, he fastened warmer kisses yet upon the proud young neck above that rough jersey with the red-lettered "Sweetheart II" rising and falling as a buoy falls and rises on the foam-white wave. "Ah, my pearl—!"

Here his love made her first gesture of denial, putting back her head. But it was only to drag out of the way again that pearl string which his lips had pressed into the pearly flesh of her throat. She whispered, rapt:

"Don't waste them upon *those*—"

Then stopped. Gasp.

For at this moment she caught sight over her lover's shoulder of something that made her spring away from him, drag at his arm, cry out:

"Mr. Mount! Look—"

Following her eyes Mr. Mount looked—and met the amazed gaze of Eric.

4

Yes, it was the same red-haired Eric of whom Mount had said, "Charming boy; the very man for Miss Verity." Eric, of all people, had found his way to this scene of Miss Verity's betrothal. No, he had not come as the emissary of Margaret's uncle. Mere flagrant coincidence had brought him—that long arm of coincidence that stretches out, in friendly gesture, to bring adventure to the adventurous.

Margaret and Mount stared at the figure, medium-sized, clothed all in glossy russet leather motoring-kit.

"Eric! It is Eric, isn't it?"

"Yppp, it's Eric" (bewilderedly gazing upon these cave-dwellers upon this beach into which Eric's mere boots had brought back the jazz age). "It is Eric. But—Sorry. I do know your voice, but I am afraid I don't know your—" Then he recognized the flushed perfect face above scarecrow clothes.

"Peggy? Jupiter Amon! Peggy here? In Corsica?"

All that Margaret could bring out was a far-away sounding:

"So this is Corsica, is it?"

"Didn't you know? Where did you think it was?"

Eric's fired-off unpunctuated questions waited for no answer. "But Margaret, you knew it was Corsica, didn't you anyhow why aren't you in Rio and where's that yacht why aren't you on her and my dear you've cut your hair? And haven't you put on weight by Jove haven't you Peggy put on nearly a stone? quite good, I think! how long have you been here?"

Margaret's questions fused with his:

"How long have I been here how long do you suppose I have been here is this January or June Eric?"

"What can you mean child how long do I suppose—"

"My *dear*—"

"Well, nobody will tell me anything—there hasn't been time really, of course—"

"But Margaret my dear tell me where are you putting up?"

"Putting up? Here!"

"How do you mean here?"

"Well, how do *you* mean, Eric?"

"Peggy! I mean, where did you sleep last night?"

Pause (for breath, perhaps).

In that pause, that huge-bearded fellow that Eric had taken for a Corsican bandit strode forward, and caught the sleeve of Eric's motoring-coat.

"Eric! I say! One moment. Let me explain—"

"Who are you?" demanded Eric not unnaturally. "Have I met—?"

"Mount. We met at Mrs. Verity's."

"By Jove! so we did. Sorry I did not know you for the moment, Mount," responded Eric with the ladylike, engaging mildness of the modern young if taken aback. "Been—growing a moustache, haven't you?"

5

Utterly pole-axed was Eric as he afterwards explained (not once or twice in this rough island story).

"Between you and I" (to quote Eric), he was here

because he was, for the first time in his life, completely fed with the Oddleys at Nice. Cynthia kept on going about with such impossible people (quite imposs! quite!, he couldn't *tell* you), and with Claude so damned low-spirited—

Eric had pushed off to Sardinia—

Sardinia was tophole (only no butter and nowhere to sleep).

So he had joined forces with a man called Meredith, who had been at Magdalen with him, and they had come over to Corsica, wanting to see something *new*—

(And, by Jove! hadn't Eric seen it?)

That day they had hired a Citröen. Come out early in her, gone right across the island.

Bathe in the middle of winter, said the other chap; wonderful fellow, but thought you couldn't bathe till June. Said he'd have a sleep in the car—

Right. Eric left him there.

Got into that quiet little cove where he was sure there would not be a soul.

Tableau! "Close-up!"

This ferocious-looking tough, registering passionate love-scene with the wahn-derful-looking girl with an O-Cedar Mop for hair, a lahvly little face, rags, and pearl necklace complete!

"Thrills," thought Eric. "Gaumont people working on a new filmings."

When the girl sang out and Eric realized that it was Peggy herself, who ought to have been on a trip round the world, eloped to the loneliest pitch in Corsica with a pukka bandit— Pole-axed, Eric!

Yaw. Yur. Yeh. The bandit then dragged him aside, gave an explanation exactly like a "scenario," only true—

Talk about the Gunpowder Plot! As for old man Lloyd—

And didn't it show you what women were *like*, without any sense of geography or distance or time? *Peggy* was the rum part of it. . . . How long did the kid think she had been at sea? How long did she imagine it took, bless her heart, to get to desert islands? Then when she was landed—how on earth did she *keep* from knowing it was only a short trip across to the French coast?

Must have a large hole where she ought to keep her bump of locality, what?

Thus Eric, the original.

6

But the subtlest intellect of the century could not have done more for them than Eric, shepherding them to the little Citröen where his college chum still slept.

He, by the way, put the newcomers down as freaks, artists, members of some queer cult where you sit round in circles and meditate. Couple of *those*, thought he; a Café Royal Llama and a High Priestess in jewellery, and a jersey, "Sweetheart" on her chest and hair like a Nazarene's that had never seen a comb since the day she was born.

Intriguing pair of simple-lifers.

7

Back, back up and down roads, crossing crazy bridges over mountain torrents, skirting precipices above the incredible ravines of scented Corsica—

Back towards civilization—

Bleak, forsaken villages flowed towards the car and were left behind—tiny, high-set churches—large family vaults under cypresses . . . a wayside cross. . . .

Telegraph-posts. . . .

But, swiftly as the car dashed ahead, frisking terrier-like up and down the hills, it was only reluctantly and slowly that Margaret Verity seemed to be coming back.

Dazed, she lived through those hours of travelling a country that (from being grimly, rockily, bare) sank into woods, into garlanded valleys, into roads between hedges of African vegetation, of cacti-green-fleshed, scarlet-starred. First encounters with herds of tiny skinny goats—with other cars—sight of grey-faced women riding mules—the first ramshackle diligence . . . all were strange to Margaret, as though she had been years away. . . .

8

“Tired, darling?”

“No—”

Reaction had come upon her. She scarcely speculated upon the vortex of activities awaiting them in the town—the explanations, the scenes—what everybody would

have to say and do before it came to their rushed consular wedding.

Ecstasy had left her. No prophetic picture rose before her of their deeply happy mating, of their life together, of that lovely home in Sussex by the sea where all the Downs would lie as playgrounds to those babies of hers—tiny Charles and Eric. . . . No hint of happiness came to her, yet. . . . Even with her shoulder nestling against the shoulder of her lover in the car, she was sad.

No, it was not belated conscience, grief at having ousted from this place another girl. Only once had Margaret thought of the Enid whose letter to “poor old Archie” was even then waiting in the crisscross of the green letter board of his club. Margaret had thought: “If that girl had cared for him she would have made him different. . . . I have made him different.”

“Everything will be spoilt,” she murmured.

“Margaret—what do you mean?”

“Coming back will spoil everything. I don’t think people can live in the world as it is now, and yet be as we were—”

Eric, turning, announced how few kilometres were yet to make.

Margaret’s heart sank. . . .

They reached the bay on the other side of the island. To get into Ajaccio they had only to skirt that bay.

“*Well*, the car has been going, hasn’t she?” boasted her driver. Needless to add it was here that the car broke down. . . .

9

Walking down the ferry-road with Eric they passed, tilted up against the turfy bank, a huge, red, glossily expensive, touring-car.

A brisk chauffeur was looking to her lamps. About her were grouped a party. Obviously English, even at a distance. One elderly, white-moustached. The others modern young and smart. A waspish-looking, painted twenty-year-old girl wearing a motor-wrap of black-patent-and-yellow-suède, with an exaggerated collar that, flung about her throat like a scarf, rose to her yellow suède helmet; another girl, hidden in furs; attendant men.

Voices rose upon golden evening; blending, as our wayfarers passed, into an orchestration of: "Absolutely overrated place Corsica! What is there to stop on for in this mouldy Bath-room taps all come off in your hand Everything tied up with bits of string like Heath Robinson Ha-ha can't expect black satin beds and petunia hangings in— Bored to tears, Beryl? Filthy little hole like Evisa do you not so dusty oh yes perfectly awful nothing on the whole Island but one motheaten cinema and that mouldy house Napoleon got bored in absolutely Napoleon's beastly brothers round the Fed with the whole of the family Bonaparte ha-ha Too Overrated For WORDS push off to-night splendid! Nice packet starts at eight means eight fifty in this country of hate all those islands don't wonder they call them the '*Iles Sanguinaires*' —"

"Oh, look!" it broke off.

Then: "Eric!" The name called in surprise for the second time that day.

The girl in furs, who had been standing with her back to the road, turned and showed the peaky face (with flame-coloured monocle) of Cynthia Oddley. . . .

The meeting and greeting of Margaret's old friends (for Claude was among the attendant youths), had the quality of those nightmares in which the helpless dreamer is pursued by those whom she would with all her power evade.

Cynthia's "Peggy . . . *You?* What does it mean—" Claude's utterly disillusioned gape—Margaret felt them, as if branded on her.

She stood there for a moment, suffering. Hardly did she hear Mount's perfectly composed explanation of how they had left Mr. Lloyd, of how they were just about all to foregather in Ajaccio—

Scarcely she heard Cynthia's description of their own program. The names of Cynthia's new friends she did not hear.

"—and we are all off, together, to-night; I'll write, Peggy," concluded Cynthia, casually.

But Margaret, as she turned away, knew that she wouldn't write; knew that this was the end.

The Oddleys and the owners of the big red Rolls were now intimate as the Oddleys and the Veritys had been. Who were these new people? So like so many she had known, in the old life. Might be the same people. They did the same things, went to the same places, dressed in the same way, used the same phrases, thought the same ready-made thoughts and considered themselves amusing,

attractive, intriguing, and bright beyond ordinary human kind.

The young men were the bodyguard of the twenty-year-old, anæmic, made-up wasp called Beryl . . . Cynthia Oddley's fur-sleeved arm was slipped into her arm; there, but for the grace of God, still went Margaret Verity.

10

In her whole-hearted recoil Margaret again murmured: "I don't want to go back; I don't want to go back."

Odd little incident that reassured her! Just a song of a girl in a boat—just a meeting with a group of queer aliens who dashed in and out of her life like a flight of kingfishers through a riverside verandah.

The ferry showed its stone jetty; fishermen's cottages, tables spread for a rustic fête surrounded by a merry cluster of Corsican peasants in Sunday clothes ("then it is *Sunday*, here," Margaret realized). This group, of men in wide black felt hats, of two pretty, half-grown drop-haired girls in gaudy blue jumpers with scarlet belts giving them the look of peacocks with red ribbons tied about their necks, were presided over by a young woman, whose deep rich contralto was finishing a song:

"Oh, les baisers quand ils sont bien donné!"

A blonde, enveloped in the deepest black of Continental mourning. . . . Out of it smiled her blithe, pink, untouched face. She gesticulated with tiny fluent hands, she stretched out before her feet in high-heeled French

shoes, she beamed upon Eric, upon Mount, upon Margaret. . . .

At that friendly smile pressure slackened upon Margaret at once. Mount, catching her eyes, said in a warm, comforting whisper: "Nearly there! Boats coming—"

Into the first boat they packed with the two girls (who, having brought out combs, were combing out their manes like a couple of bob-haired mermaids) and with the singer. Their ferryman was a broad-shouldered Corsican with keen dark face and speaking eyes. Only those eyes actually did speak. For he was a deaf mute. As his passengers rocked and shifted into their seats, he mouthed grotesque sounds like an infant who cannot yet talk.

The singer, who had dragged on down to her gay blue eyes a coal-black scuttle of profoundest crêpe, sat facing the wide, shirted back of the ferryman, sat next to Mount and Margaret.

Off went the boats towards the stone wall of the harbour. Last stage of their journey to civilization!

11

Margaret looked back, across the curving bay. Somewhere beyond it lay their magic beach, cut off by screening hills. Save for two high peaks (snow-covered, rosy-white), those distant heights rose clear-dark against clear-primrose of the evening sky. Deep, deep and quiet, "the bay waters under the boat slid and gleamed; fluid rock-crystal. Ribbons of seaweed looped or swayed in the tideless water—brown-satin ribbons waving against jade-

green satin. Cars, tied by casual French string into their row-locks, dipped almost silently. . . . Laughing French voices rang out clearly, clearly. . . . Those gaudy peacock girls flashed white teeth; teased the city-clad blonde for another song.

"Yes. Make her," whispered Margaret, "do make her sing again, Mr. Mount. . . ."

"Surely you know my name?"

"But—I think Archie is so hideous," she admitted. "I won't begin calling you that. Can't I call you something like 'Dick' or 'Bill'—the two nicest names for a man?"

"Love you to."

"Sure you don't mind?"

"Certain. Besides, as it happens—"

"What?"

"Some people at school always called me 'Bill.' "

"Did they?"

Margaret had a sudden twinge of jealousy of these friends who had found names for him before ever she had heard his names at all. "They did? I shall always call you 'Dick.' Dick! your French is so good. Get that girl to sing."

Young Mount turned his pretty smile upon that singer. Already she beamed acquiescence.

"For you," said she in French to Margaret.

What was she? The lovers discussed it afterwards. She had all the dignity of a Paphian priestess, all the golden heartedness that was Marie Lloyd. Was she a music-hall singer? In the chorus? An amuser of sailor-folk at Marseilles?

Who could say? Possibly money must be paid for hearing songs from those lips which, untouched now as peach blossoms, must be outlined and greased. It might be that those fresh cheeks must be rouged, those downy brows darkened—that lines must glare upon the rounded figure, that the little feet, now sandy, must mince down to the footlights to earn silk stockings and pert shoes. . . .

Here, on holiday, she still made holiday for others—spread sunshine. . . . In her, gaiety the modern joined hands with primitive delight. . . . Margaret watched her glances fly like blue butterflies towards the other boat; shamelessly they flirted with Eric—tenderly they turned towards the babe on its mother's lap.

"*She* can be both," thought Margaret, learning in that chance encounter more than she could learn in all the schools.

That woman's look, without words, impressed upon the newly betrothed girl a lesson which perhaps in words might run:

"Woman was the last thing to be civilized. So, use civilization. Use all its advantages; but don't let its shame master you. Put one hand firmly in that of modernity. With the other cling tightly, tightly, to the simple things of life. And good luck, little sister!"

12

Feeling herself admired, the Corsican singer turned to those foreigners, chattered ingenuously, gave details of her day. There had been a funeral; she had been to her cousin's to eat. They had well eaten; had partaken of

“oursilles,” had drunk the red wine of the country until all their heads had turned like windmills.

She added: “Je m’appelle Aimée.”

“Et vous le serez beaucoup,” Mount put in simply.

This *mot* gave pleasure. It was repeated, called out, echoed by the other boat’s crew being rowed alongside. Doubtless it would remain in that Corsican family an unforgotten tradition, that of the young Englishman who, hearing the name that means beloved, said: “And so you will be, very much.”

Margaret begged: “Sing!”

“Les baisers,” screamed the peacock flappers.

And Aimée sang. Her resonant contralto stressed, parted, rejoined syllables of an ordinary French café concert song, from her lips only a poignant lyric. . . .

At sea, the farewell chantey is called “The Loth-to-depart.” This was Margaret Verity’s good-bye to her Adventure—this, Aimée’s song.

“Les baisers
Quand ils sont bien donnés—
Tendrement—
Langoureusement—
Les caresses
Sont mieux que des promesses:
Oh, les baisers
Quand ils sont bien donnés!”

Margaret, meeting Mount’s eyes, blushed rosily but did not drop her own. At that moment, far behind their heads across the bay there bloomed (cast by the sunset on the distant mountains) a blush of rose colour. Won-

derful it bloomed; it was gone before the end of her song.

"*Bis!*" cried the woman with the baby in the other boat. The deaf-mute ferryman, to whom all this music was silence, rowed sturdily on mouthing grotesque noises; the type of half the world that does not hear the music of love. Margaret and Mount heard, nor need they cease to listen. His hand sought, found the girlish sunburnt hand that was also seeking his. He whispered:

"This is the second time I have held your hand in a boat."

"I know."

"And, Margaret! I wanted to ask you something."

"What?"

"About last night."

"Last night, Dick— Could it, could it only have been last night? What were you going to ask me?"

That singing Venus had broken now, very softly, into another of her common, her exquisite songs. Clear as thrushes call, rhythmic as waves on that distant shore, every note, every syllable sounded. Mount noted the tune. Often afterwards he sang it to that translation which Margaret had made for him.

"Here is my heart that longs to love you
Here are my arms to clasp and close—
My eyes are near, my lips above you—
And here glows Pleasure's deepest rose."

"*Bis, Bis!*" clamoured the girl cousins. The deaf-mute ferryman rowed on.

"What were you going to ask me, Dick?"

“Just before you dropped off to sleep—were you dreaming? You said something about Cleopatra’s pearl.”

“Did I? Yes, I remember now. What made me think of it then? I was wondering. That pearl she dropped into her glass to drink to Antony—”

“Well, darling?”

“If the wine were not strong enough to kill her, how was it strong enough to melt the pearl?”

Mount only said: “Perhaps, soon, you’ll know. . . . You know my name for you?”

Not time for answer then.

For here was the wharf. Sailors were unloading the Mail Boat; there was a plantation of slender masts. Beyond were streets of steep houses, the waving of palms—the nestling of oranges in dull green foliage against pale stucco—the doorsteps of little shops all spilt over with wares and babies, the crowds of people of sombre, half-Italian beauty; the colour and the struggle of squalid romantic everyday life.

Her lover sprang out onto the stone steps.

“Here we are. Margaret—”

Margaret, going out in that last look back across the bay, away in the direction of that beach, actually did not hear his voice. (“Dear place where I was happy, dear place that gave him to me, good-bye—”)

The next “Margaret” was from another voice. Soft, flurried, jubilant—

“Mother! Mums—”

13

Had this been on an English quay, it is possible that the assembled groups might have stared to see that rush forward of a well-bred, well-dressed lady who, without shame, flung herself on the neck of a tall, handsome scarecrow of a girl with hair like a bird's nest and a face of pale apricot sunburn.

"Never to cry before people"—maxim of Violet's youth—alack, how it melted at this supreme moment! How unrestrainedly did her tears flow!

Etiquette had left the earth. Certainly it had left that Corsican wharf where, around this rejoicing group, clustered Latin peasants with their ineradicable habit of rejoicing with those that do rejoice— Not in a hurry shall I forget Violet Verity's bewildered cordiality in the face of Aimée's greeting, Aimée's fervent shake-hands. . . .

14

Margaret—disentangled from her mother's arms—was enveloped by a bear-like hug from her mother's escort, and was hailed with: "How are you, my dear? How was it? Better than the Ritz?"

"Much, thank you, Uncle Tom!" retorted Margaret with perfect outward heartiness. . . .

Very well the girl kept it up, affectionately laughing at the old man, asking him for details of where he had stayed, asking for the whole story of his being caught in the thunderstorm the night before that night when she

had had her first glimpse of him then on his way to pay a surprise visit to their creek and to join them at breakfast time—

Not by outward sign, I think, would Margaret ever betray her real feeling on this subject.

But she would never forgive Uncle Tom.

Unfair, unjust, illogical as Nature! The fact, sharper than a serpent's tooth, remained. She could not forgive what he had done. In spite of its being the best thing for her! In spite of her owing to him renewed vigour, fresh outlook on life, happiness, love, "Dick" Mount himself! Even when to this debt were added the items of ideal marriage, home, and those turbulent treasures Charles and Eric—it was to make no difference.

Margaret would never, never forgive her Uncle Tom.

15

Her mother, of course, had in one flash seen what other change besides those of physical regeneration, of mental poise, of the unclouding of pearly beauty had been wrought in her child.

Violet turned to the other tall scarecrow. She, who had never been "quick at knowing what to say to young men," was not quick now.

Only her gentle face quivered appeal.

"It's all right," he said in a voice that was his guarantee. "It will be all right, Mrs. Verity." He gave her that smile which would win him friends whether on a cannibal island or at an international conference.

Then he turned it upon Margaret, who bloomed afresh.

He slipped his hand into the soft curve of her arm as finally the cortège ascended the steep, cobbled, palm-bordered, dirty, picturesque, littered, irresistibly charming Corsican street towards our hotel.

No one but Margaret caught his whisper:

“Come along, my pink Pearl—”

THE END

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